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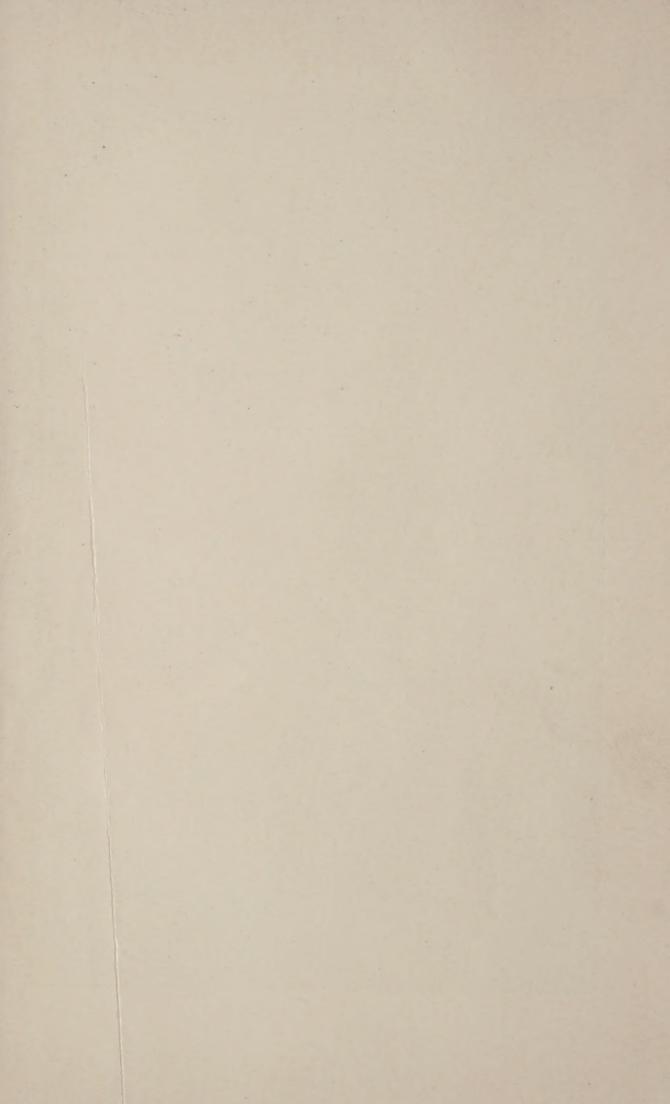
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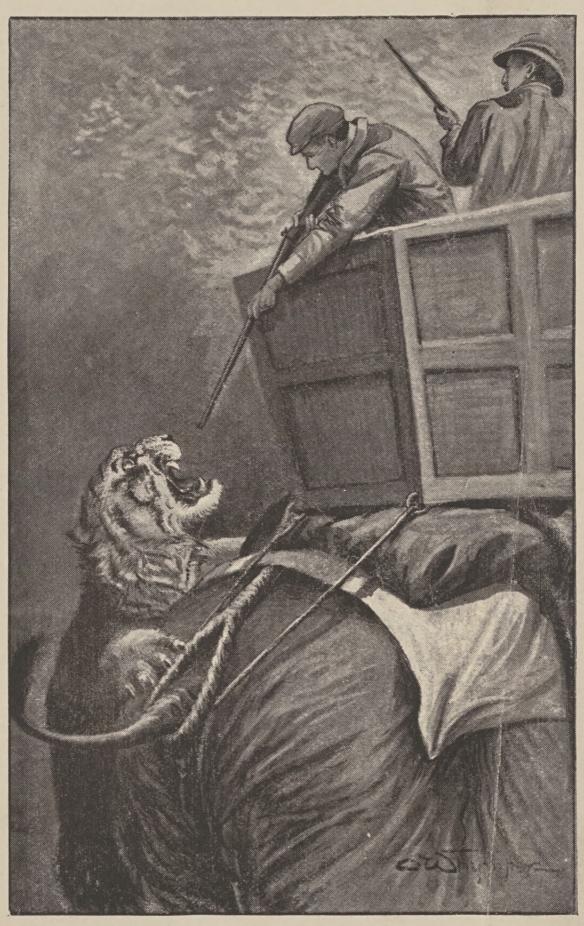




ON THE WORLD'S ROOF







The End of the Tiger Hunt.

Page 39.

GHE WORLD'S ROOF

BY

J. MACDONALD OXLEY

AUTHOR OF

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"The Hero of Start Point," etc.

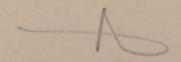


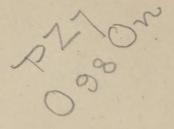
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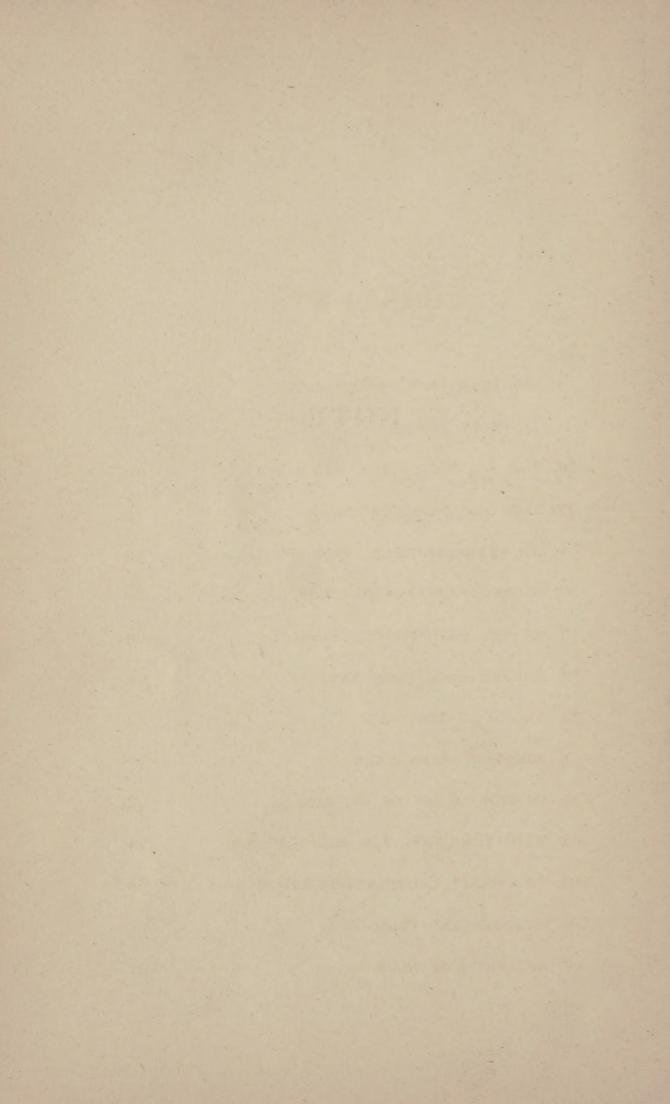


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NOTE

The Author desires to express his special obligations in regard to this story to Andrew Wilson's "Abode of Snow," and E. F. Knight's "Where Three Empires Meet."

J. M. O.



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ON THE WORLD'S ROOF

CHAPTER I

THE START FOR THE HEIGHTS

When Kent Stannard returned to India from England, where he had been at school ever since his eighth year, he found his father full of an enterprise that at once enlisted his keenest interest.

Kent was a typical English boy in mental as well as physical characteristics. Somewhat above the usual stature for his age, now sixteen years, he had the light curly hair, blue eyes, clear skin, and regular features that bespoke the Anglo-Saxon. His well-proportioned frame had been thoroughly developed by a long course of cricket, football, rowing, and other athletic exercises; and his mind richly stored with knowledge, for he was one who put his heart into his studies no less than into his sports. Among the trophies he brought back with him, to proudly show his father, were as many

prizes for high standing in his classes as for prowess in the field or on the river.

In common with other sturdy boys he cherished a keen craving for adventure, and when his father, after the first raptures of their reunion were over, in a burst of confidence not usual with him, but due no doubt to the excitement of the occasion, let out something about what he contemplated doing, Kent at once exclaimed, "What a grand idea! You'll take me with you, of course?"

At first Mr. Stannard seemed doubtful. He had not fully made up his mind to have his boy accompany him, for there were sure to be great hardships and no small danger involved in the undertaking; and as he looked at him now, presenting a perfect picture of boyish vigour, it seemed as if, perhaps, he ought not to be exposed to such trials and perils.

But Kent was not to be gainsaid. He had carried away with him to his English school a lively sense of the romantic side of life in India, which had been nurtured by his father's letters and his own reading, so that he returned to the country full of determination to have all the sport and excitement possible before settling down to the serious business of life.

His father's project promised him precisely what he desired, and he was glad that Mr. Stannard had waited until his return before carrying it out. As a matter of fact this was due more to the force of circumstances than to any thought of Kent in the matter. Mr. Stannard, who held a high position in the Forestry Department of the Indian Service, and whose duties often brought him to the foot of the Himalayan Mountains, had for some years past been planning a trip into the mysterious regions on the other side of that mightiest of earthly barriers. Again and again, from one cause and another, he had been compelled to postpone his purpose, but he never gave it up; and now at last the way was clear—a long furlough had been granted him by the Department, his own private affairs could be left to themselves for a while, and only one difficulty stood in his way.

This was Kent himself, for when he had written for him to come home from school he had not known that the chance to carry out his long-cherished design would come so soon; otherwise he would have delayed his son's return for another year. To Kent, however, this falling out of events seemed quite providential.

"Why, father," he argued, as they talked together, "what could be more proper than that you should take me along? You'll have nobody else with you except your servants, and you'll soon get tired of their company; and then, if anything were to happen to you, who'd look after you, I'd like to know?"

Mr. Stannard's countenance, which had been furrowed with serious thoughts, relaxed into a smile of indulgent pride.

"And do you think, Kent," he asked, "that you would be equal to taking care of me if I should fall sick, or break my leg, or something equally foolish?"

Straightening himself up, Kent gave his father a look of warm affection as he responded with great vigour, "I could do my best any way, father, and that would be a good deal better for you than being alone, wouldn't it?"

"To be sure, Kent; to be sure," returned Mr. Stannard. "I'll have to think it over, and see if I can arrange to have you go with me."

Satisfied with this, for he felt no doubt as to the final issue of his father's deliberations in the matter, Kent said nothing more, and went out for a ride upon his pony.

Mr. Stannard and his son were practically alone in the world; for, although they had some relatives in England, there was but little communication with them, and they had only themselves to look to in India. While this rendered it easy in one way for them to make the venture together that Mr. Stannard had in mind, in another way it created an obstacle; for if any catastrophe should befall them entailing the loss of both their lives, it would mean the extinction of their branch of the family,

a possibility which Mr. Stannard shrank from contemplating. There were, then, many things to be considered before a conclusion could be reached and it was not until the next day that Mr. Stannard announced his decision.

"I've thought it all over thoroughly, Kent," said he. "As to your going or remaining here, there's much to be said on both sides. For some reasons I would prefer your staying behind. But, on the other hand, your heart is set on going, and I'm free to confess your company will be a great comfort, and so I've decided to——"

"To take me along—hurrah!" shouted Kent, finishing the sentence for his father, and at the same time throwing his arms about his neck in the exuberance of his joy. "You're a dear, kind pater, so you are, and I'll be the best boy you ever knew, all the time; you see if I'm not."

Mr. Stannard returned the embrace, saying with a laugh, "It's easy promising, Kent, isn't it, when you have just been allowed to have your own way. We'll see what your fine words are worth when they're a month old."

And so the matter was settled, and the wide boundaries of India did not contain a happier boy than Kent Stannard, whose first impulse, naturally, was to rush out and tell the good news to the rest of the world. Having abundant time at his command, Mr. Stannard thought it a good opportunity to let his son see something of the wonderful country of which he knew but little; and so the journey from Bombay to the foot of the mountains was made in a very leisurely fashion.

It was in the middle of the month of March when they set out, the railway train bearing them swiftly along in artificially cooled carriages that enabled them to be comfortable in spite of the blinding sunlight and the golden dust of the Indian plain. Halts of a day or two were made at Nasik, a city so holy in the estimation of the Hindoos that the mere mention of the name with due reverence is supposed to effect the forgiveness of sins, and at Nandgaum, where a visit was made to the wonderful rock-temples and sculptured caves of Ellora.

But neither of these places made so deep an impression upon Kent as Jubbulpore, or rather the famous Marble Rocks, ten miles from that city. They drove thither in a comfortable horse-carriage that was a pleasant change after the monotony of the train, and put up at the beautifully situated government bungalow, where an aged but active khansamah prepared for them a remarkably good dinner.

The visit to the Marble Rocks was made at

dawn, while the moon, then in full glory, still held her place in the sky, and the scene was one of surpassing beauty. The Nurbudda River, after being pent up in a narrow chasm and plunging madly over a lofty ledge, flowed quietly through a cañon enclosed by cliffs of snowy marble.

Mr. Stannard and Kent went up in a boat, and so still was it at that early hour that only the soft splash of the paddles broke the silence. The marble walls on which the moon shone, sparkling like silver under her rays, reflected so brilliant a radiance as almost to break the gloom of the opposite side, that was deep in shadow, and here and there shafts of dazzling light brightened the bosom of the stream, otherwise as black as ink. As the boat glided by a cleft in the rocks one of the boatmen sent a thrill through his passengers by indicating the spot as the favourite drinking-place of a man-eating tiger that had been levying its awful toll of human life upon the neighbourhood.

"Is there any chance of our seeing him?" asked Kent eagerly. "I'd so like to see a real wild tiger with my own eyes."

"But suppose he saw you, and took it into his head to make his breakfast of you?" suggested Mr. Stannard, with a smile.

"Oh, there's no fear of that," responded Kent gaily. "So long as we stayed in the boat we'd be

all right. He'd never dare to swim out after us, no matter how hungry he was."

He had hardly spoken when the boatman in the bow suddenly gave a cry of terror and shrank down in the bottom of the boat as if to dodge some missile.

By a common impulse the others looked at once in the same direction, and there, seen plainly in the moonlight on the very edge of the river, was an enormous tiger whose stripes showed black and white in the silver radiance.

The boat was not more than twenty yards from the shore, and the terrible creature seemed so near that at first even Mr. Stannard was paralysed with panic. But it was only for an instant. Grasping his rifle, which lay beside him, and preparing to fire if the tiger showed the slightest sign of springing after them, he commanded the boatmen to paddle for their lives.

At the sound of his voice the tiger, who had up to that moment seemed unconscious of their proximity, lifted his huge head from the water he had been vigorously lapping and gave an ominous growl that sent a shiver through all Kent's frame.

"O father, he's coming after us!" he cried in a terror-stricken tone, making the light boat rock by a sudden movement towards the stern, where his father sat. "Keep still and be quiet, Kent!" commanded Mr. Stannard sternly, without taking his eyes off the tiger.

By this time the boatmen had recovered their self-possession sufficiently to ply the paddles strenuously, and the distance between the man-eater and the boat rapidly increased.

Still growling fiercely and switching his tail from side to side, the tiger kept his baneful eyes fastened on the boat, yet made no effort to follow it, and in a few moments more it was completely beyond his reach. Not until then did Mr. Stannard lower his rifle. He had not pulled the trigger, although he was an excellent marksman, because he feared the consequence of inflicting a wound that would infuriate the fierce creature without instantly rendering it powerless for harm.

But his motive was misunderstood by Kent, who, as soon as his first fright had passed, said reproachfully—

"Why didn't you shoot the brute, father? You had such a splendid chance."

"Because you were with me, Kent," replied Mr. Stannard gravely. "Had I been alone I wouldn't have hesitated a moment."

Kent blushed, and said no more. For the first time he realised how much his presence added to his father's care, and he registered a vow with himself to give him as little trouble as possible while the long journey before them continued. Propelled by vigorous paddling, the light boat went on to the end of the cañon, where a brief halt was made to rest the boatmen.

As they set out to return, the sun rose in unclouded splendour, lighting up every nook and crevice of the chasm, which, although it lost the weird appearance it had borne in the moonshine, seemed even more extraordinary in the light of day. Glittering fish leaped from the glassy water in pursuit of the brilliant dragon-flies that skimmed rashly near the surface; monkeys of all ages and sizes scrambled about the rocky banks, disturbing the morning silence with volleys of simian billingsgate to show how hotly they resented the intrusion of "humans" upon their domain; while on the ledges above them peacocks spread their splendid tails, and called attention to their beauty by their harsh, piercing cries, that seemed so strangely out of character.

Kent, who carried his own rifle, a particularly fine one he had got in London before leaving England, was just about to take a shot at one of the peacocks, when the boatman nearest him laid a restraining hand upon his arm, saying in an earnest, entreating voice—

[&]quot;Young sahib not shoot! It make the bees mad.'

"Make the bees mad—and what harm if it does?" demanded Kent somewhat angrily, throwing off the brown hand from his arm.

Mr. Stannard, who had not visited the Marble Rocks before, was puzzled on his part by the Hindoo's action.

"What do you mean?" he inquired. "Why is it dangerous to fire?"

The Hindoo's expression was a curious blending of humility and determination as he hastened to explain as best he could, in his broken way, that the big bees'-nests which could be seen hanging here and there against the cliffs were the homes of a very large and ferocious kind of bee, whose sting was almost as poisonous as a snake-bite, and which, if aroused, would pursue them with relentless fury.

When the boat had passed down beyond all the nests, the boatman, evidently much easier in his mind, told of how two sahibs out on a hunting expedition, and not aware of the dreadful character of the bees, had, in firing at a peacock, unfortunately chanced to hit one of the nests. Instantly the bees flew out and swarmed to the attack of the Englishmen, one of whom was so badly stung that he died, while the other only saved his life by leaping into the water and diving constantly until he had shaken off his merciless assailants.

The hearing of this sad incident impressed Kent

deeply. It seemed such a dreadful way for a man to die—stung to death by bees.

"The poor fellow," he murmured. "I suppose he could not swim, or he would have jumped into the water too."

From Jubbulpore the travellers went on to Allahabad, the city famous as the point at which the awful tide of mutiny was stemmed and the Indian Empire saved, and thence to Agra, where, of course, they did not fail to spend many hours admiring the Taj Mahal, the Dewan-i-Khas, the Moti Musjid, and other marvellous structures which seem more like the fabulous palaces of the "Arabian Nights" relations than the actual work of human hands. Kent, who had a markedly artistic temperament, took great delight in these miracles of architecture, and his father was fain to delay their departure in order that they might make yet one more visit to them.

The evening they spent at the Taj Mahal, when the moon shone in all her glory, was an evermemorable one; and they would both have been glad to linger longer in a city so rich in splendid spectacles, but it was necessary to push on that they might reach the foot of the mountain before the beginning of summer. For this reason they made no further halt of any duration until they reached Delhi, where Kent again had the opportunity of feasting his eyes upon palaces and mosques of marvellous beauty.

For two days they gave themselves up to these splendid proofs of Mogul wealth and power, the Jama Masjid, in the heart of the city, and the wonderful Kutab Minar, ten miles to the south, claiming their special attention.

Of course Kent could not be content without ascending to the top of the latter; but Mr. Stannard, having made the ascent on his own account more than once previously, and not feeling quite up to the mark that day, remained below. Up the dark winding staircase Kent made his way, starting off at great speed, which soon, however, was reduced to a walk as the steepness of the climb told upon his legs and lungs.

Reaching the top in due course, he shouted and waved his hat triumphantly to his father, who was sitting on a block of stone in a shady corner nearly two hundred and fifty feet below him, and who returned the salute by waving his handkerchief without making any attempt to shout back.

The view from Kent's lofty stand-point was glorious beyond all description, and he lingered so long enjoying it that his father grew impatient. It was some time before he could attract Kent's attention, but after much expenditure of breath and waving of arms he finally succeeded. Kent

at once began the descent, whistling merrily, and feeling well satisfied with himself.

He had passed the highest balcony, from which he signalled to his father to let him know he was on his way down, and was about half-way between it and the next, when, in a dusky part of the staircase, he found his progress barred by a most repulsive-looking being, who opposed his passage with outspread arms and menacing mien.

CHAPTER II

A TIMELY RESCUE

Now Kent had his full share of British pluck. Indeed he was inclined to be brave to the verge of rashness; but to meet such a dirty, half-naked, and wild-looking creature when alone on the dimly lighted interior of a tower full two hundred feet up in the air, was surely sufficient to try the nerve of a stout-hearted man, not to mention a boy scarce half through his teens.

"What do you want? Why are you standing in my way?" he demanded, with a tremor in his voice, of which he was himself conscious.

The mysterious being's answer was only to brace himself still more firmly in the middle of the narrow passage, and to glare fiercely back as though Kent were his deadliest enemy. His attitude and expression were so suggestive of violent, if not indeed of murderous intent, that Kent broke out into a cry of "Help! help!" and sought to retrace his steps to the balcony he had just left, and from which he could appeal to his father for aid.

But the fakir—for such was the character of his assailant—had no idea of permitting this. Stretching out a long, bony, sinewy arm, he caught Kent by the collar of his coat and roughly held him back, muttering something that was, of course, quite unintelligible to the terrified boy.

Frantic with fear, Kent struggled furiously, and even struck at the fakir's arm, striving with all his might to break away, and shouting—

"Let go of me! What business have you to hold me like this?"

But the fakir, smiling sardonically at these vain efforts—for Kent, sturdy lad though he was, seemed a mere child in his powerful grasp—repeated his guttural words, whatever they meant, and evidently intended to hold on to Kent until he granted his request.

Kent would have been only too glad to do anything in his power could he have understood what was required of him, but no comprehension on his part being possible, he increased his struggles for liberty, and his cries for help. At length, finding his utmost strength unavailing, he resorted to strategy; for, his first panic having passed away, he had in some measure recovered his mental balance. Ceasing all effort, he stood still, and looking the fakir hard in the face, asked of him in an indignant tone—

"What do you want of me? Why do you try to keep me here?"

The man, seeming taken aback at this action, let go of Kent, and again repeated the strange gibberish. This gave Kent the opportunity he had hoped for. Like a flash out went his right arm, and his tightly clenched fist caught the fakir in the bridge of the nose, at the same moment that his right foot received a sharp kick at the heel.

Utterly unprepared for such an attack, he went over like a nine-pin, and springing past him, Kent dashed down the steps at a break-neck speed, not stopping until he plunged plump into the arms of his father, who, growing uneasy at his delay, had come up part of the way in quest of him.

"Hello! what's the matter? Is there a tiger after you?" queried Mr. Stannard, seeing from his son's face that he was not descending so recklessly for mere amusement.

"Not a tiger, but a horrid man," panted Kent.
"That is, if he's picked himself up again."

"Why, what do you mean, my boy? What man is chasing you? There's no one coming down behind you," said Mr. Stannard, with puzzled expression, after listening for a moment.

Kent then proceeded to tell his story, at which his father first laughed, and then looked grave.

"It was no doubt one of those so-called holy

men that go about the country living upon their betters," explained Mr. Stannard. "He wanted a few annas from you, that was all, and was determined not to let you pass until you handed them over. But, although he went the wrong way about it, you shouldn't have knocked him down all the same, and he can make things very nasty for us if he sees fit. We'd better get away from here as soon as possible."

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what else I could have done," exclaimed Kent, somewhat crestfallen at being reproved instead of applauded for his treatment of the fakir. "The rascal wouldn't let go of me, and I had no idea what mischief he was up to."

"I'm not blaming you a bit, my son," responded Mr. Stannard. "What you did was perfectly natural, but the dirty wretch will not be likely to take that view of it, and if he makes his grievance known to his own people there'll be trouble for us."

While they were talking they were hastening away from the Kutab Minar, Kent looking back every few steps to see if the fakir was following. But whether he had knocked the senses out of him for a time by banging his head against the stone walls, or gave him such a scare that he dare not show himself again, certain it was that they saw nothing more of him.

Leaving Delhi that same day, they continued on without further halt for sight-seeing until they reached Simla, where some time would have to be spent in making the necessary preparations for the journey into the mountains. Arriving as they did late in April, they avoided the great confusion consequent upon the coming of the Viceroy, the Commander-in-Chief of the army, and the other high and mighty officials of the supreme Government, who always spend the hot summer months, that would be unendurable down on the burning plains, on the cool heights of the Himalayan hills. They were therefore able to secure comfortable quarters in a big bungalow, and Kent settled down for a good look at the awe-imposing powers upon whom rested the responsibility of the most important portion of England's colonial empire.

Even to a boy who had no social ambitions to satisfy, no personal ends to serve, Simla could not fail to be full of interest, and being of a very observant and inquiring turn of mind, Kent found abundant diversion in the brilliant life eddying about him, while his father busied himself with getting ready for their expedition into the mountain regions beyond.

A favourite amusement with him was riding one of the spirited little horses that were to be had for hire up and down the steep hill roads. They were

usually polo ponies which had played their parts at that exciting and exhausting sport, and been sold by their owners to native livery-stables for whatever price they would bring. One delicious evening, while Kent was trotting along over a beautiful bit of road a couple of miles from the tower, enjoying the pleasant gait of his pony and admiring the lovely landscape, that seemed to improve with every turn of the winding way, he overtook a lady out for her day's ride, accompanied only by a native groom. She was mounted upon a grey Arab mare, that pulled at the bit and pranced about on the road in a way that betrayed a very high-strung and nervous nature.

Kent, who had a pretty good knowledge of horses for a boy of his age, having spent his holidays with an uncle who kept a hunting-stable, was greatly taken with the lady's mount.

"What a little beauty!" he exclaimed to himself, "and how well she sits her! But it seems to me she'd have a hard job stopping her if once she got the bit in her teeth. That duffer of a groom wouldn't count for much then;" and he gave a contemptuous glance back at the groom, who was pounding along on a big "waler" that had evidently seen its best days some time ago.

As he passed he saw that the lady was both young and pretty, and quickly made up his mind

that she was the wife of some officer, summering at Simla, while her husband sweltered at his dreary post down on the plains.

"I wish I knew her," he murmured regretfully.

"I'd like to challenge her to a little brush when we come to a straight bit of road."

He said this because he happened to be mounted upon a pony that had shown quite a turn of speed, and to have tried conclusions with the clever-looking Arab would have been just the thing to suit him that fine, cool evening. But, of course, he could not, under the circumstances, venture to propose such a thing; although it seemed to him, as he clattered by, and the curveting Arab showed signs of objection to being passed, his fair rider shot a bright glance at him that had a spark of challenge in it.

He had gone on about a furlong, and had just decided to turn around to retrace his way, when the sharp rattle of hoofs beating hard and fast upon the rocky mountain road came to his ears, and looking back, he saw the grey Arab galloping towards him at the top of her speed, while her rider was evidently making a frantic but futile effort to rein her in.

"The little vixen's bolted!" exclaimed Kent.

"And such a place for a runaway! I must do my best to stop her, or the dear knows what'll happen."

His own pony, hearing the rapid hoof - beats, showed signs of excitement also, and knowing that if the Arab once got a good start of him he might be unable to catch up in time to be of any service, Kent gave him the rein, and in a moment he too was off at a gallop, with the runaway clattering behind.

Having been over that part of the road before, Kent knew that, while it was good enough going for another half-mile or so, beyond that there were sharp turns and quick descents that could not fail to give trouble.

"If I don't stop her soon," he murmured, "she stands a good chance of breaking her neck."

Looking back, he saw that the flying Arab was rapidly overtaking him, for his pony was going at little more than half-speed, and his plan of action was promptly decided upon.

A moment more and the runaway was up to him, her rider still tugging frantically at the reins, though her ghastly face and wide, staring eyes betokened how extreme was her terror. Kent, hurriedly glancing over his shoulder, could see her lips move in appeal to him for help, although not a word was audible, and he nodded his head vigorously in response.

As the Arab rushed past he pressed his own pony to her head, and leaning forward, by great

good fortune succeeded in getting a grip of the right rein in his left hand

Then began a struggle the like of which Kent had never taken part in before. Throwing himself back in his saddle, he strove to rein in the two galloping steeds simultaneously. Even had his own mount been entirely under control, this would have been no easy feat. But, as a matter of fact, the pony had caught the spirit of the Arab in some measure, and was disposed to keep right on, while the lady, who seemed to be on the verge of fainting, let the rein go, and grasped the pommel of her saddle instead.

Well was it then for Kent that he not only had the seat of a Centaur, but a strength of arm few boys of his years could equal. The two horses plunged and pressed against each other, bringing their riders in such close contact that Kent could have lifted the lady out of her saddle had he been equal to such an effort. As it was, he managed to steady her for a moment when it appeared as if she must fall off.

Presently, however, his efforts began to tell. Hampered as they were by being crowded together, the horses had perforce to slacken speed. Their strides quickly shortened; the pony began to pull up; and at length, just before the dangerous portion of the road was reached, both pony and Arab came to a stop, blown, wearied, and conquered.

Springing to the ground, Kent held out his arms to the lady, who, murmuring faintly, "God bless you; you've saved my life," let herself slip from the saddle on to his shoulder, and instantly fainted dead away.

"Hello! here's a pretty go!" said Kent to himself, as he bore his helpless burden to the roadside and laid her down gently on a convenient bit of turf. "What on earth am I to do now?"

It certainly was a rather bewildering situation for a boy who had never been thrown much into the society of ladies, and consequently still felt somewhat ill at ease in their presence. Here he found himself wholly responsible for the care of a beautiful woman, to whom he was an entire stranger, and whose present need he hardly knew how to meet.

The sound of heavy hoof-beats rapidly approaching was therefore welcome music to his ears, and when there appeared around the curve of the road a lady and gentleman cantering gaily homeward, it was a wonderful relief to him.

Taking in the situation at a glance, the riders reined up, and the gentleman inquired anxiously, "You've had an accident, I see. Is the lady seriously hurt?"

"I don't think she's hurt at all, sir," responded Kent. "She's only fainted from fright." "Ah, then, my dear," said the gentleman, turning to his companion, "it is a case for you. Let me assist you to dismount;" and so saying, he sprang to the ground and lifted the lady off her horse.

There was a spring of clear, cool water close by, and Kent having brought a capful of this, the lady bathed her unconscious sister's face with it, and soon the latter opened her eyes again, looking about in a startled way, and murmuring—

"What a fright I've had!" and then turning to Kent, she said gratefully, "You managed that splendidly. I would hardly have thought it possible if you had not done it."

Kent blushed, and bowed his acknowledgment of the compliment, and soon conversation became general, during which time the groom lumbered up on his "waler," his countenance full of concern, until he saw that neither his mistress nor her fractious steed had come to any harm.

The Arab having quite calmed down again, his plucky mistress insisted on remounting, and the four new acquaintances rode back to Simla together, with the relieved groom bringing up the rear.

Kent's exploit, of course, was quickly noised throughout the place, and he found himself the object of a great deal of attention. The lady to whom he had rendered such timely service, and who proved to be the young wife of Colonel Courtenay, of a famous Sikh regiment, was profuse in her proofs of gratitude, among other things insisting upon Kent accepting a gold locket of curious workmanship as a memento of the event.

Having plenty of time on his hands—for his father had to overcome a good many difficulties in getting ready to start—Kent seized the opportunity to get acquainted with the game of polo. After his gallant rescue of Mrs. Courtenay he need never lack for the use of a good polo pony, and he had lively times in the afternoon chasing the white wooden ball up and down the bit of plain that was utilised for a polo-ground.

Then he had a chance to do some hunting, too, for good sport could be obtained without going very far from Simla. Indeed he there made his first acquaintance with real tiger-hunting, and the experience was so thrilling as to quite satisfy his interest in the royal brute, for the time being at least.

Reports had been coming to Simla of the dreadful doings of a man-eater, which had suddenly made its appearance on the edge of one of the valleys below, and carried off so many people as to threaten to depopulate what was a prosperous community. As soon as the gravity of the case became clear, a party was organised for the destruction of the monster, which Mr. Stannard, who had several tigers to his credit already, made haste to join. When Kent heard of it nothing would do but that he must be taken along also, and after considerable persuasion, he was allowed to have his own way, on condition that he contented himself with a safe place in the rear of the party when the hunt took place.

The leader of the party was a Captain Inglis, who had won great renown as a tiger-slayer; and with him, besides the Stannards, was a dashing young lieutenant and a member of the Viceroy's staff. Half a score of servants accompanied them, and they were fitted out with tents, supplies, and other baggage sufficient for their needs for a week, as they were determined not to return until they accomplished their beneficent purpose.

The journey to the scene of the tiger's bloody operations occupied a whole day, and Kent was sorely tired of riding under the hot sun by the time they went into camp for the night.

Kent had never camped out in India before, and the novelty of the situation made it difficult for him to sleep. During the day the intense heat had made the dense woodlands through which their way led as silent and lonesome as if no living creature breathed in their dim recesses. But no sooner had the short twilight deepened into the

gloom of night than the air, before vacant save for the wide sweeps of some solitary bird of prey, became filled with the voices of feathered flocks returning to their roosts. Flying foxes shot across the open vistas in the forest, and great horned owls swept past on muffled wings; while to one peering eagerly into the dusk there appeared those spectral shapes that haunt such scenes, the confusing contrasts of shade, the strange play of waving boughs and rigid tree-trunks, and the dimly discerned forms of animals moving stealthily from shadow to shadow.

All this was familiar enough to the other members of the party, and not even the weird booming of the great rock-monkey, the hoarse bark of the sambur, nor the horrid half-laughing shriek of the hyena ruffled the placidity of their evening smoke, nor delayed the moment of their falling asleep But Kent lay awake until long past midnight, listening to these strange noises, and now and then rising from his camp-bed to look out through the flaps of the tent to assure himself that the wild creatures were not investing the camp and preparing for a night attack, so furious did the chorus seem at times.

At length, in sheer weariness, he dozed off, to dream of fleeing from a huge man-eater with cavernous mouth and blazing eyes, bent upon claiming him for its next victim.

CHAPTER III

THE KILLING OF THE MAN-EATER

It took another day's riding to bring the hunting-party upon the scene of the man-eater's depredations, and when they camped that night they had many visitors, who brought accounts of the awful brute that fairly made Kent's flesh creep. With eyes starting from their sockets and much Oriental extravagance of language, the panic-stricken natives described the tiger's tremendous size and terrifying appearance: how his great belly, into which so many of their dear ones had gone, almost touched the ground as he strode along; how he had a diabolical way of holding up a party of wayfarers while he rolled himself playfully on the sand before them, and at last, inspecting them all around, carefully chose the fattest for his victim.

Not satisfied with such wonders as these, they went on to relate that this monster had the power of transforming himself into an innocent-looking wood-cutter, and of calling or whistling through the jungle until an unsuspecting victim approached;

while, finally, one wrinkled old villager capped the climax by gravely asserting that the spirits of all the man-cater's victims rode upon his head, forewarning him of every danger, and guiding him to the most favourable spot for ambushing an unwary traveller.

Mr. Stannard and his companions, of course, paid no heed to these marvellous tales. They had been hearing similar ones ever since they began to hunt in India. But Kent, possessing a strong imagination, and being, indeed, more willing to believe than to be sceptical, was deeply impressed by them. "They're greatly exaggerated, to be sure," he said. "But there must be some truth in them, all the same, and we're bound to have a big fight before we're done with the man-eater."

As soon as the news spread that the sahibs had come to rid the country of its dreadful pest the rejoicing people crowded in to offer assistance, or to be spectators of the operation, and the hunters had no difficulty in obtaining all the assistance in the way of native shikaris and beaters they required. They were also fortunate in being able to secure two elephants which had had some experience in hunting, and could be relied upon to maintain a firm front before the foe.

At daybreak of the morning after their arrival on the field, word was brought that one of a party of pilgrims, travelling unsuspectingly through a jungle road not far distant, had been carried off by the tiger. At once the command was given for the hunt to begin, and the elephants being harnessed, Mr. Stannard and Kent occupied one howdah, while Captain Inglis and Lieutenant Fordyce had the other.

Captain Inglis, having had the most experience in tiger-hunting, naturally took command, and from the way he disposed his forces it was quite evident that he thoroughly understood his work.

It was still early in the morning when they reached the scene of the last tragedy. The unfortunate pilgrim had been struck down where a small ravine crossed the lonely road. There, lying in a dried-up pool of blood, they found the shoulderstick with its pendent baskets, in which he had been carrying the holy-water from his place of pilgrimage, while shreds of cotton sticking to the bushes showed where he had been dragged down into the bed of the nullah.

Kent turned sick at the sight. It was the first time he had ever been brought so close to death by violence, and his heart went out in passionate sympathy for the poor Hindoo thus foully murdered. But quickly upon this sense of sickness and of sympathy followed the burning desire for retribution, for revenge upon the abominable man-

eater; and from the bottom of his heart Kent hoped that he might have the chance of putting at least one bullet into that striped body, even though it should not be the fatal one.

"I hope Captain Inglis won't have it all to himself," he said to his father as they remounted their elephant, "and that you and I will be able to get in a shot before it's all over."

"I hope so too, Kent," responded Mr. Stannard, whose own heart had been deeply stirred by the pitiful sight. "But we mustn't run any unnecessary risks, however strongly we feel, and we must do exactly what Captain Inglis says."

The track of the destroyer was easily followed into a very thick grass cover, where he had broken up and devoured the greater part of the body. Some shreds of flesh, and the skull, hands, and feet, were all that remained. Thence the trail led into a dense jungle on the river-bank, through which the trackers worked in fear and trembling, covered by Captain Inglis' rifle, as his elephant trod in their footsteps.

At the river the pugs (footprints) went out on a long sand-pit, showing how the tiger had refreshed himself with a good drink after his horrid meal, and then they came back to be lost amid a great mass of rocks full of caverns and crannies. A day's hard work was spent searching in this locality

without avail, and at sunset the hunters returned to camp, much disappointed at their lack of success.

But if they had nothing to show for their toils, the object of their eager quest was in better case so far as he was concerned; for they had hardly sat down to dinner when a carrier came rushing in to report that one of his company had been taken out of the middle of their train of bullocks by the tiger just as they were going into camp for the night.

Of course nothing could be done that night, but oh, how impatiently every member of the party longed for the return of daylight! After a hasty breakfast the start was made, and soon they came upon the tiger's track and the remains of his last hideous butchery.

"We must have him to-day at all hazards," exclaimed Captain Inglis, looking down at the half-eaten body of the ill-starred carrier. "This is awful work."

The elephants were pushed ahead at as rapid a pace as the nature of the ground permitted. There was difficulty in following the destroyer's trail. He had gone down the nullah some distance and then turned off into the grass, and finally made his way into a dense jungle of jaman and tamarisk in the bed and on the banks of a small river.

"If I'm not much mistaken, we'll find our friend here," said Captain Inglis, after a survey of the

ground. "We've been driving him pretty hard. He must be longing for a rest, and this is as good a place as he could wish for water and shade."

The trackers were accordingly sent out to circle the cover, and in the course of an hour they returned with the gratifying intelligence that there was no sign of the tiger having left the jungle, and without doubt he had been cornered at last.

The heat of the day, the best time for the grim business before them, was near at hand, and without delay Captain Inglis arranged his order of attack. The cover was completely surrounded by a circle of beaters, and look-outs placed in commanding positions in the trees, who were instructed at a given signal to make all the noise of which they were capable. Then, having posted the elephant upon which Mr. Stannard and Kent were at the only point where the tiger could easily get up the high bank and make off, the veteran hunter pushed his own elephant, which was well used to this sort of work, slowly and carefully into the dense cover.

The air was scorching hot, and utterly still save for the soft footfalls of the elephant and the whirring of wings as peafowl rose in alarm before the advance of the huge creatures. Near the centre the jungle grew extremely dense, and its bottom was cut up into a number of water-channels among the tough roots and overhanging branches of the tamarisk.

Sitting up in the howdah with his rifle held ready for instant use, and watching as far as he could the progress of Captain Inglis, it seemed to Kent as though the loud beating of his heart must be as audible as the tones of a bell. He dare not speak to his father, who stood erect, gazing fixedly into the dim obscurity of the jungle. The one thought in his mind was, "Which way will the tiger come? and will I have any chance to fire at him?"

Presently Captain Inglis' shrewd old elephant paused and began to kick the earth, and to utter the low, tremulous sound by which it would indicate the close presence of the fierce quarry so eagerly sought.

"I see him!" exclaimed the keen-eyed mahout, who, being lower down on the elephant's neck than his master, was in a better position to peer into the fateful gloom. "He's lying under that jaman bush."

Captain Inglis could not make him out, but, to prove the accuracy of the mahout's vision, directed his companion to throw a stone into the bush, a number of such missiles having been provided for the purpose.

Lieutenant Fordyce, with the skill of an expert

cricketer, threw a large stone into the precise spot, and instantly the man-eater rose up with an angry roar, and sprang to meet the daring intruders on his privacy. The sight of him when he emerged from the shade of the jaman bush was sufficient to try the stoutest nerve. Not even Captain Inglis had ever seen one of larger size, and as he stood his ground for an instant, the personification of merciless fury, and the white moon on the top of his broad forehead seemed to shine in the sun, while the bristles stuck out from his mighty jaws like barbs of steel, it was no wonder that the mahout shrank back against the howdah trembling like an aspen-leaf, and Lieutenant Fordyce felt cold chills running down his spine.

Yet not a fibre in Captain Inglis' body quivered as he covered the terrible creature with his double-barrelled rifle, and had not his elephant given a sudden start, no doubt the doom of the man-eater would at that moment have been sealed.

As it was, the first ball found its way to the tiger's shoulder, and the second caught him in the belly as he sprang convulsively aside. But neither shot was fatal, and, growling horribly, the maddened brute broke away in the direction of Mr. Stannard and Kent.

Never will the latter forget that moment. The tiger had evidently counted upon escaping by the

way which their elephant, thanks to Captain Inglis' foresight, blocked, and this interference with his plans seemed, if possible, to intensify his fury.

On he came, death and destruction speaking from every hair of his great striped body, and Mr. Stannard could hardly be blamed for the tremor of nerve that caused his arm to swerve sufficiently to send the bullet into the tiger's jaw instead of right between his glaring eyes, as he had intended.

For a moment the brute was checked. But it was only for a moment. Shaking his head savagely, he sprang forward again, and, seized with panic, the elephant whirled about, thereby so disconcerting Mr. Stannard that he let his second barrel go off harmlessly into the jungle.

The next instant a horrid worrying sound behind, and the wild plunging of the elephant, made it clear that the tiger's last spring had carried him within striking distance of his foes.

"Fire at him, Kent, for Heaven's sake!" cried Mr. Stannard excitedly. "My rifle is empty."

The huge head of the tiger, dripping with its own blood, was now only six feet from Kent, and as his father spoke, the boy, barely knowing what he did, leaned forward, and thrusting the muzzle of his rifle almost into the ravening mouth, pulled the trigger.

As it proved, Captain Inglis himself could

hardly have done better. The bullet crashed through the roof of the tiger's mouth into his brain, and, losing its hold upon the elephant, the lifeless body fell heavily to the ground.

The whole thing had been so startling that for a moment Kent stood silent and motionless. The mad leap of the tiger, that awful gory head coming so close to the howdah that the foul breath tainted the air, the quick thrust of the rifle into that yawning cavern of death, and then the crack of the rifle and the sudden collapse of the appalling monster—was it all a wild dream?

A hearty thump on the back brought him to himself, and he heard his father exclaiming—

"Splendidly done, my boy! You gave him the coup de grace in fine style." And then turning to Captain Inglis, who had hurried up on his elephant, "That was not at all bad for a boy, was it?"

"No, indeed," replied the veteran hunter cordially. "I congratulate you heartily, Kent. My bullets were bound to kill him in time, but he needed another to quicken the business. Did yours find him anywhere?" he added, looking to Mr. Stannard.

"Unless my eyes played me false, it found him somewhere about the head," answered Mr. Stannard. "Let us look him over and see."

The beaters by this time had gathered around

and begun their chorus of rejoicings over the death of their enemy, giving vent to their feelings in showers of opprobrious epithets and grossly insulting insinuations as to the family history of their fallen foe.

On examination it was found that either of the wounds inflicted by Captain Inglis' bullets would have been sufficient to kill any other animal than a tiger, which seems to have quite as many lives as the proverbial cat (of which it is, after all, only an enlarged specimen), and that Mr. Stannard's shot had taken effect on the right side of the lower jaw.

Lieutenant Fordyce was therefore the only member of the party who could not claim a share in the triumph over the man-eater, and he was wise enough, instead of taking that to heart, to content himself with congratulating the others upon their good fortune.

Great was the gratitude of the natives to the sahibs at their being freed from the monster whose depredations had during the past year rendered a whole district almost uninhabitable, and closed up the roads previously much frequented by travellers.

Kent was so impressed by the importance given to the affair that he began to cherish thoughts of becoming a white shikari, and making a speciality of tiger-slaying. It seemed to him a career combining entertainment for oneself and benefit to others in a unique manner.

On the return of the party to Simla their successful exploit was the talk of the place, and Kent came in for a lot of hand-shaking and warm words of praise, which he found very pleasant indeed. But, Mr. Stannard's preparations being nearly complete, the social attractions of Simla had to be disregarded in order that the final arrangements for the journey to the heights might be hurried through with. By the first of June everything was in readiness, and, having bidden "good-bye" to their many friends and received their good wishes for a prosperous trip, the little party set forth upon its adventures. It comprised some thirty persons in all, of whom, however, only two besides Mr. Stannard and Kent require special mention, the others being merely coolies to carry the provisions and baggage. These two were rather remarkable characters in their way. They were to act as the personal attendants of the two sahibs, and Mr. Stannard had taken the utmost pains in their selection. Standing side by side they presented a striking contrast.

"They're the long and short of it," Mr. Stannard said, laughing, when he first introduced them to Kent.

Chunna Lal was a splendid specimen of a Sikh.

His stature exceeded six feet, and his frame was one mass of bone and sinew, without an ounce of superfluous flesh. He had a handsome, honest countenance, adorned by a moustache and beard of raven hue, which he sedulously cultivated. His skin was of a dark olive tint, and his big black eyes looked out upon the world with a frank, fearless gaze that seemed to say, "Respect me as I respect myself." He was Mr. Stannard's attendant, and was to act as butler or steward, if such a term could be applied under the circumstances. He had already been through a good part of the country it was proposed to traverse, and had a knowledge of the people and their different dialects that would be of immense value.

His associate in service, a Goorkha named Bahadur Kanwar, was so ridiculously dissimilar that the warm friendship soon established between them certainly could not be explained upon the principle that like likes like. A scant five feet was the most that Bahadur could claim in height. But what he lacked in this direction he made a noble attempt to atone for in the other. So broad and sturdy was he that the activity he could display when necessary was a constant surprise to the Stannards. In him were strangely united the strength of a bull and the agility of a monkey. At first glance his countenance seemed rather re-

pellent, so strongly marked were his features, so small and sharp his eyes, and so swarthy his skin. But once he smiled all doubt as to his character vanished. Genuine good humour twinkled in every line of his rugged face. He could, it was true, be capable of fearful outbreaks of temper, and at such times be transformed into a veritable demon. Such occasions, however, were extremely rare, and there was little probability of the fury ever being aroused by Mr. Stannard or Kent. It would be those who might attempt to do them wrong or injury that would call it forth. Bahadur was a capital cook, therefore the duty of preparing the meals devolved upon him; and he evidently took both pride and pleasure in his work, while the Stannards had good reason to be well satisfied with the menu he managed to prepare for them out of wonderfully simple materials.

Of course Kent could not think of calling these two men by the names that respectively belonged to them. In true schoolboy fashion, he must needs find some easier appellation; and so, after much activity of mind, he succeeded in evolving something to his satisfaction. The stalwart Sikh he called Champ, being short for champion, the man being the finest specimen of a native he had so far seen; while to the sturdy Goorkha was appended the appropriate nickname of Bunty. Both men took

quite kindly to Kent's revision of their cognomens, for only he used the new titles, and they evidently looked upon him with great favour from the very start.

Such were the principal members of the little party whose adventures and experiences amid the most mighty and mysterious of mountain ranges on this globe have now to be related.

CHAPTER IV

INTO THE MIDST OF THE MOUNTAINS

Mr. Stannard and Kent, with Champ and Bunty, rode shaggy, sure-footed mountain ponies, but the baggage-bearers went on foot. The rule, therefore, was to start them off a couple of hours in advance, and to follow them in a leisurely fashion.

Anything like speedy progress was not to be considered. The "Great Hindustan and Thibet Road," as was its high-sounding designation, proved to be nothing more than a cut bridle-path leading along the sides of the hills from Simla to the Narkunda Ghaut, and from Narkunda up the valley of the Sutlej to Chini and Pangay.

Although its difficulties were nothing in comparison to what were to follow, Kent, who was having his first experience of mountain-riding, found the strain on his nerves pretty heavy for the first few days. The road, which was never more than eight feet broad, and often narrower, had no parapet or railing of any kind, although it climbed across the face of enormous precipices and well-

nigh precipitous slopes, where a fall meant inevitable death.

Bunty and Champ, who had both traversed it several times, were at pains to tell Kent of the fatal accidents which had taken place, and to describe graphically just how they had occurred.

Thus, the young daughter of the missionary at Kotgarb had been riding across the tremendous Rogi cliffs, when the pony shied at a stone that came rolling down in front of it, and sprang into the merciless abyss to instant death.

In another case, on the way between Serahan and Taranda, a Mr. Leith, who was on his wedding trip, with his bride following close beside him, in trying to cure his steed of a provoking way it had of rubbing against the rough rock wall, caused it to back towards the precipice, and its hind feet going over, it could not recover itself, and both horse and rider were dashed to pieces.

Mr. Stannard, not to be outdone, told how a judge of the Supreme Court, who, in company with some ladies, was passing along this road, lost his life through his horse starting at a strange-looking mountaineer, who suddenly appeared round a sharp turn of the cliff. The animal held on for some time with its fore-legs, long enough for an agile rider to have disengaged himself from the saddle. But the judge was stout and slow of movement,

and, moreover, seemed paralysed with fear, so that he could do nothing to save himself.

It need hardly be said that these mournful relations did not tend to put Kent at his ease, and he gave such attention to the direction of his pony that the creature showed signs of restiveness, which being noticed by Mr. Stannard, he called back, 'Give him his head, Kent; give him his head. Don't try to keep a tight rein on him. He knows the way better than you do."

Taking his father's advice, Kent let the reins hang loose, and all went well until they reached the Narkunda Ghaut, where the road rose nearly ten thousand feet above sea-level, and from its narrow shelf one could look down a vast distance into the gloomy abyss of the Sutlej valley. Here, at one of the very worst bits of the road, where by necessity the little party was strung out in single file, a big monkey, disturbed by Mr. Stannard's horse, sprang across the way right in front of Kent's pony, and before fleeing up the face of the cliff, paused for an instant to make hideous grimaces and shrill gibbering cries at the intruders upon its peace and privacy.

Hitherto Kent's pony, a sturdy little mare, as sure-footed as a mountain goat, had borne herself with most commendable composure in the face of falling rocks and other excuses for a sudden shy.

But the sight and sound of the monkey proved too severe a trial for her nerves, and backing quickly away from the ugly creature, she got her hind-legs over the edge of the road, at this point utterly undefended by a parapet or railing.

Realising his peril in an instant, Kent flung himself forward on his pony's neck, crying, "Help! father, help! I'm going over!"

Mr. Stannard, who was about ten yards ahead, at once tried to turn his horse to get to his son's aid, but the animal, hearing the noises behind without understanding what they meant, became frightened in its turn, so that, instead of obeying him, it took the bit in its teeth and hurried off in spite of his frantic tugging at the reins.

So soon as he saw that he could not control the horse, Mr. Stannard flung himself off, and ran back at the top of his speed. But if Kent had had to depend upon him alone for rescue his case had been hopeless.

His wiry pony fought desperately for life, clinging to the edge of the road with her fore-feet as though they were hands, and digging her hind-feet into the side of the cliff. She maintained her position in this way long enough for Kent to have disengaged himself from the saddle had not his right foot got caught in the stirrup-leather, so that he could not instantly free himself.

Another moment and it would have been all over with him, but, happily, before that moment passed the Sikh interposed. Springing from his horse, he rushed towards Kent, crying out, "Hold on, Sahib! I pull you up."

When he came to him he reached down his long arm, and catching Kent by the collar of his coat, drew him up beside him as though he had been a mere child instead of a well-grown lad. It was a marvellous feat of strength, and even in the midst of his awful peril the wonder of it filled Kent's heart.

Nor was the giant content with this. Relieved from her rider's weight, the pony still struggled bravely against the pitiless rocks, and having set Kent upon his feet, Champ proceeded to render a like service to his steed. Bending down, he grasped the reins close to her mouth, and then throwing himself back, dragged the little creature, who cleverly helped all she could, up on the road again, where she stood trembling and exhausted, but otherwise none the worse for her narrow escape.

By this time Mr. Stannard had come up, and throwing his left arm about Kent in a glad embrace, held out his right hand to the Sikh, exclaiming, "God bless you, Chunna Lal! But for you I'd have no son to-day. Your splendid strength was never put to better purpose."

Looking as composed as though nothing remarkable had just taken place, the Sikh gave his hand modestly, saying, "That's all right, Sahib. Bad pony to be frightened by monkey; mustn't do that again."

Kent, on his part, hardly knew how to express his gratitude, but he managed somehow to say enough to make clear to his rescuer how deeply he felt, and in his mind he registered a resolve never to forget the timely service.

Being afraid to remount his own pony after this proof of its readiness to shy, Kent exchanged with the Goorkha, who had a slow, steady animal, which could be implicitly trusted, and who, on his part, was quite willing to take the more lively little mare.

Farther on the road, when they were resting for the evening at the Serahan bungalow, Kent had the opportunity of seeing for himself the fate from which Champ's strong arms had delivered him. They had just finished dinner, and were sitting in front of the bungalow, Mr. Stannard enjoying his pipe, and Kent idly throwing pebbles at the dogs that hung about, when Mr. Stannard drew his son's attention to some hill-men who were chasing each other on the grassy brow of a precipice that rose above the road leading to Gawraa.

"That seems dangerous sport these fellows are

having up there," Mr. Stannard said, eyeing them with interest. "But I suppose they know what they're about."

He had hardly spoken when one of the men, in trying to evade the hot pursuit of a companion, lost his footing, slipped on the edge of the cliff, and then, with a shrill cry, that pierced far down into the valley beneath, plunged over the precipice, striking the road hundreds of feet below with an awful thud, and bouncing off to fall still farther into the rocky ravine.

Kent shuddered and shut his eyes at the sight. It made him so sick and faint that for the moment the power of speech or motion seemed gone from him.

But his father, springing up and thrusting his pipe into his pocket, started off, crying, "Come along, Kent, and see if the poor fellow's killed."

Kent, glad to be of service if possible, hurried after his father. They had some difficulty in reaching the spot where the unfortunate hill-man lay, and, as Mr. Stannard fully expected, found him beyond all human aid. Strange to say the body showed no signs of a bruise. There was blood in the mouth and nostrils, but otherwise no indication even of the cause of death. Kent wondered very much at this, but his father explained it by saying that no doubt the man became insensible during

his fearful fall, and so offered no resistance when he struck the road, contact with which had, of course, knocked every particle of life out of him.

As he looked at the inanimate body, which but a few minutes before had been so full of life and energy, Kent naturally thought how narrowly he had escaped a like death.

"O father!" he exclaimed, with a shudder, 'that's just what would have become of me if Champ had not saved me, isn't it? How thankful I ought to be that nothing happened me!"

"You may well say so, Kent," responded Mr. Stannard, laying his hand affectionately upon Kent's shoulder, while he regarded him with looks of love and pride. "I'm afraid I've not been wise in taking you with me on this wild trip and exposing you to such dangers."

"Now, don't say that, father," said Kent pleadingly. "It is very good of you to let me come, and I'm just as safe with you as I could be anywhere else; and when there are only the two of us out here, and I've been away from you so long, it would have been cruel to have gone off without me."

Kent's reasoning was so sound, and it so thoroughly fell in with Mr. Stannard's own inclinations, that there was no need of continuing the argument. For better or worse, through fair weather and foul, in journeyings far and perils many, they would be inseparable companions, to the great content of both.

The road along which they made steady if not very rapid progress presented an ever-changing panorama of wonderful beauty and grandeur. Now they would be brought face to face with a mighty peak, clothed in eternal snow, soaring twenty thousand feet into the clear, cold air; and then they would be gazing down into a dark gorge so deep that the head reeled at the sight. From time to time they would come upon Himalayan hamlets hidden on the lower slope of the tremendous mountains, perched upon bare ridges of rock, or placed beside green meadows with enormous deodar-trees, giving them shade from the burning sun.

The trees of the Sutlej valley were remarkable for their size and beauty; and Mr. Stannard was continually calling Kent's attention to a graceful weeping fir or a sky-piercing "silver pine." But grandest of all were the deodars, the cedars, which sometimes attained a girth of forty feet, and towered two hundred feet or more above the scanty soil that seemed so poor a support for so glorious a growth. With their straight stems, their graceful pendent branches covered by a work of Virginia creepers and clematis blooming generously, they certainly were worthy of the travellers' warmest admiration.

At Panguay, where there was a large, comfortable

bungalow, Mr. Stannard halted for a day or two in order to rearrange his party; for here the Hindostan and Thibet road, so far as it was a pathway upon which any labour had been expended, came to an end, and henceforth not even the hardy, surefooted hill-ponies could be relied upon. It was necessary to secure some additional bearers, and especially a dandy on which Kent could be carried when the fatigue of foot-travel proved too much for his strength.

At the bungalow they met a couple of English travellers who had set forth from Panguay the week before, intending to go as far as Shipki, and possibly a little way into Thibet if permitted to do so. But they had found the difficulties of travel so much worse than their expectations that they had to confess themselves beaten, and to return without accomplishing any part of their programme. Naturally enough they sought to dissuade Mr. Stannard from proceeding.

"It's the most abominable apology for a path you ever imagined," protested one of them. "You've just got to hang on by your eyelids in lots of places."

"Oh, I know how bad it is; I've been over it before," responded Mr. Stannard, with a serene smile.

"Well, you must be fond of hard work," retorted

the other, looking Mr. Stannard over as though he was trying to understand him. "One experience of a road like that ought to satisfy anybody for a lifetime; but there's no accounting for taste."

Having been discomfited themselves, the officers would no doubt have found satisfaction in persuading Mr. Stannard to turn back without even making the venture; but they did not know their man. He was not one to give up a purpose fully determined upon at the urging of another. If he did not make his way to Shipki, and thence into Thibet, it would be because he could not accomplish it himself, not because somebody else had failed.

It was near the end of the month of June when, the preparations being completed, the journey was resumed. Henceforth they would have no bungalows to rest in at the end of each stage, and as it would not be prudent to sleep in any of the native huts, they took with them two small tents especially adapted to their needs. One of them Mr. Stannard and Kent could occupy, and the other would be shared by Bunty and Champ. As for the coolies, they looked after themselves, building big fires at night and curling up close to them, like so many dogs.

Kent took very kindly to the idea of tenting; it was so much more romantic than spending the

nights in the gloomy stone bungalows. But before they had got far on their way he began to long for the bungalow again, the wild winds of the Himalayas rendering a canvas tent anything but an adequate shelter from their buffeting.

The roughness of the road defied description; it required the exercise of the utmost faculties of head and foot to get over it safely.

On the way to Jangi the remains of a granite avalanche were encountered that it took an immense amount of trouble to pass. For a great distance the whole mountain-side was covered with huge blocks of gneiss and granite, over which the travellers had to scramble as best they could.

Nor was this the most trying feature of their situation. Where so many rocks had fallen, it was quite reasonable to suppose that there were others yet to come down, and the ever-present possibility of some huge boulder high above them taking the notion of charging down upon them, made the passage of the avalanche débris quite a serious business.

The most critical point of the crossing was where they had to get round the corner of a giddy precipice by means of two long poles that rested on a niche, and were there met by two similar poles coming from the other side which were on a lower level, and therefore more difficult to connect with. Mr. Stannard and the Goorkha went round without difficulty, but when it came to Kent's turn, he, for the first time, got so dizzy that he could not proceed. He was just at the corner, and in spite of his father's injunctions to "keep cool" and "come along," he dropped upon the poles, and clung to them desperately, not daring either to advance or retreat.

CHAPTER V

AN EXTRAORDINARY STEED

Kent's situation was as curious as it was perilous. Neither his father nor the servants could go to him, because the pole-bridge was too frail to bear two persons at the same time, and it seemed as if they would have to confine their efforts in his behalf to shouting at him, when a bright idea sprang into Bunty's brain.

Snatching off his turban, he proceeded to unwind it with eager haste. In a trice it became a long band of linen that would easily reach to where Kent hung helplessly. Tying a stone tightly into one end, he threw it to Kent, crying, "You catch it, Sahib. Me pull you along."

After a couple of misses Kent caught the stoneweighted turban, and drew it tight.

"Now you hold on, Sahib," enjoined the Goorkha.
"You come along all right."

It was wonderful the difference it made to Kent, having the turban in his hand. His attack of dizziness was due to fatigue and long exposure to

the blinding sun while toiling over the broken granite, and the confidence the sense of connection with the other side of the difficult crossing inspired was sufficient to banish his temporary weakness.

"That's splendid, Bunty," he said, brightening up.
"Just keep it taut and I'll get along first-rate."

Stepping firmly but carefully, he soon accomplished the remainder of the passage, and stood at his father's side.

"Please don't think me a baby, father," he pleaded, laying his hand on Mr. Stannard's arm. "It was not that I was frightened, but I was dreadfully tired, and my head suddenly seemed to go so that I did not dare take another step. I won't make such a goose of myself again in a hurry, I promise you."

"I quite understood how it was, Kent," replied his father tenderly. "I've worked you too hard to-day, I know, but I was anxious to get across this abominable place as soon as possible. However, we've passed the worst of it now, and we'll camp at the first good place we come to."

The Goorkha was warmly praised for his clever expedient, and this put him in great spirits.

"You and me even now," said he exultingly to Champ. "You help young Sahib, I help young Sahib. Both of us help young Sahib. That's all right, eh?"

Champ nodded a dignified assent, and Bunty tossed his head as though to say, "What a fine pair of fellows we are, to be sure!"

At Jangi they found a charming camping-place, in a fine grove of walnuts and edible pines. There was a small village close by, in which was a Lama temple that contained an automatic prayer-mill, which interested Kent greatly.

He had already seen the ordinary prayer-wheels, small brass affairs which were to he held in the hand, and turned from left to right by an axle passing through the centre. But here was something that surpassed them all—a huge thing some eight feet in diameter, made of bronze, and so constructed that a stream of water falling upon it kept it turning continually. As each revolution meant not merely one but ever so many repetitions of the great Lama prayer, "Om ma ni pad ma houn," and this doing it by deputy was considered quite as efficacious as personal pleading, the present and eternal advantages of such an arrangement were easily apparent.

When he understood the whole thing Kent was much tickled, although he courteously concealed his amusement from the eyes of their guide, a young Lama, who had over a million prayers reeled off while they stood about the machine.

As they came away from the temple Kent said

to his father, with a quizzical smile, "Wouldn't these prayer-wheels be a fine thing for the boys at school? Instead of saying their own prayers at night, when they're so tired and in a hurry to get to bed, they would just give the wheel a couple of turns, and then turn in themselves with a clear conscience."

"O Kent, my son!" said his father, "how can we be sufficiently grateful for the fuller light that we have in this all-important matter? To think of men intelligent enough to pray to God at all being so foolish as to imagine that He can be reached by machine-made prayers! And yet I'm afraid that only too many Christian prayers are hardly less mechanical, so we mustn't boast ourselves."

Beside the big prayer-wheel, the Jangi Temple contained Thibetan inscriptions and paintings of Chinese devils that showed the travellers were passing from the region of the Hindoo into that of the Mongol. Henceforward the people they would meet would be almost entirely Thibetan. Not a change for the better in any way, but one to which they had to become accustomed.

The next day's journey seemed a comparatively lazy one after the dangers and difficulties of the preceding ones. It took them away from the Sutlej valley, which they were only too glad to

leave, up the right bank of the Teti river, and so on to Lippe, a large village, near which they camped for the night.

Here Bunty, who was a great admirer of the fair sex, got himself into a bit of a scrape by showing some attention to an almond-eyed, chubby-faced woman whom he happened to encounter as she was returning from herding a flock of goats. An old ram was giving her some trouble, and Bunty gallantly going to her assistance, she seemed so appreciative of his services that he was emboldened to make advances. He could make himself understood pretty well in her dialect, and they were getting along famously, when her husband appeared upon the scene, the incarnation of the green-eyed monster.

He at once began to shower abuse upon his wife, which proceeding roused Bunty's quick temper to such a pitch that, springing upon him, he caught him by the shoulders and shook him until he had completely shaken the breath out of him, and for very lack of it the fellow had perforce to cease his tirade, while the woman vanished, leaving the goats to take care of themselves.

The man, having recovered from his first surprise, now turned upon Bunty, and there was every prospect of a first-class fight ensuing, which might have ended in a disastrous appeal to weapons, when Mr. Stannard opportunely appeared on the scene.

Without waiting to ask any questions he called out, "Hello! what are you about there? Stop that instantly," and laid a restraining hand upon each of the angry men.

They instantly let go their hold of one another, for the Sahib's commands carried unquestionable authority, but stood glaring furiously, in evident eagerness to press the matter to an issue.

Taking it for granted that his servant was in some way to blame, Mr. Stannard then asked for explanations, whereupon both men started talking at a tremendous rate, each endeavouring to shout down the other. The din was appalling, and quickly attracted a crowd, who gathered around in evident enjoyment of the excitement.

With much difficulty Mr. Stannard succeeded in getting both sides of the story, and then set himself to restore peace. It seemed that the indignant husband was the chief man of the village, and the woman his young wife, only lately espoused, of whom he was more than ordinarily jealous. Mr. Stannard therefore thought it expedient to offer an apology on behalf of his retainer, the Goorkha having flatly refused to do it himself, and to salve the official's feelings by a present of some good cigars, whereby he was entirely mollified.

To Bunty, after the whole thing had blown over, he administered a lecture, threatening to send him back if he got into further trouble, as it was of the utmost importance that they should maintain triendly relations with the people along the route.

The Goorkha took his scolding with his wonted imperturbability. Whatever the Sahib might do and say was all right. He would stand anything from him, but as for apologising to that chump of a Tartar, who did not have the sense to perceive that his appreciation of his wife's attractions was something to be pleased with instead of resenting, he would not demean himself by doing it, and Mr. Stannard had been wise in forbearing to compel him.

At Lippe, Mr. Stannard was able to procure for Kent, who found the incessant climbing beyond his strength at times, a steed the like of which he had never imagined he would bestride.

This was the yak, or wild ox of Thibet, Bos grunniens, or grunting ox, as it was most appropriately called, the only animal equal to the task of overcoming the tremendous difficulties that awaited the travellers.

The one Mr. Stannard secured was a splendid specimen of its kind. It stood nearly six feet in height at the shoulders, and must have weighed not less than twelve hundred pounds. A dense

coat of shaggy brown and white hair covered its broad flanks and short, stout limbs, while the tail was finished off with a great white tuft, that was admirably adapted for whisking away flies. The long, narrow head bore a pair of smooth, sharp-pointed horns, curving upwards and outwards, that seemed capable of any amount of mischief, and the whole appearance of the animal was decidedly awe-inspiring.

Kent viewed the new acquisition with some trepidation.

"You don't mean that I'm to ride on that extraordinary-looking thing, do you?" he queried, with an incredulous glance at the yak, which was grunting away, and shaking its head as if very anxious to give somebody a taste of its horns.

"Not unless you want to, Kent," replied his father. "If you prefer going on foot, we can load the fellow up with baggage. But, if I'm not much mistaken, you'll be glad enough to jump on his broad back before the day's journey is over."

A spirit of mischief and daring suddenly taking the place of his first feeling of apprehension, Kent, without giving any hint of his purpose, retreating a few steps, sprang forward again, and vaulted very cleverly right on to the yak's shoulders.

This startled the great creature so that it broke away from its driver, who had been holding it by a

stout rope attached to a ring in its nose, and the moment it realised that it was free it lowered its head, and raising its continuous grunting to a savage bellow, charged straight into the group of people right in front of it, among whom were Champ and Bunty. The vigorous scramble that took place was highly amusing, and as nobody was hurt, those who were not concerned in it could afford to laugh at the frantic motions of the others.

Happily the yak, though his first attempt at tossing somebody proved a complete failure, showed no sign of trying again, but put off down the valley at a lumbering gallop, grunting fiercely.

The Sikh's sense of dignity had been so touched by the sudden *volte-face* he had been compelled to execute that he made no effort to pursue the runaway, although his young master was clinging help-lessly to its back.

But the Goorkha's feelings had not been hurt in the least. Though it were necessary to turn a somersault to save himself, he would have done it, and then bobbed up serenely. When, therefore, the yak made off, Bunty, the moment he recovered himself, began pursuit, and running much faster than the clumsy creature, not only caught up with it, but caught hold of its long tail as it streamed out behind, the big tuft at the end affording him a splendid grip.

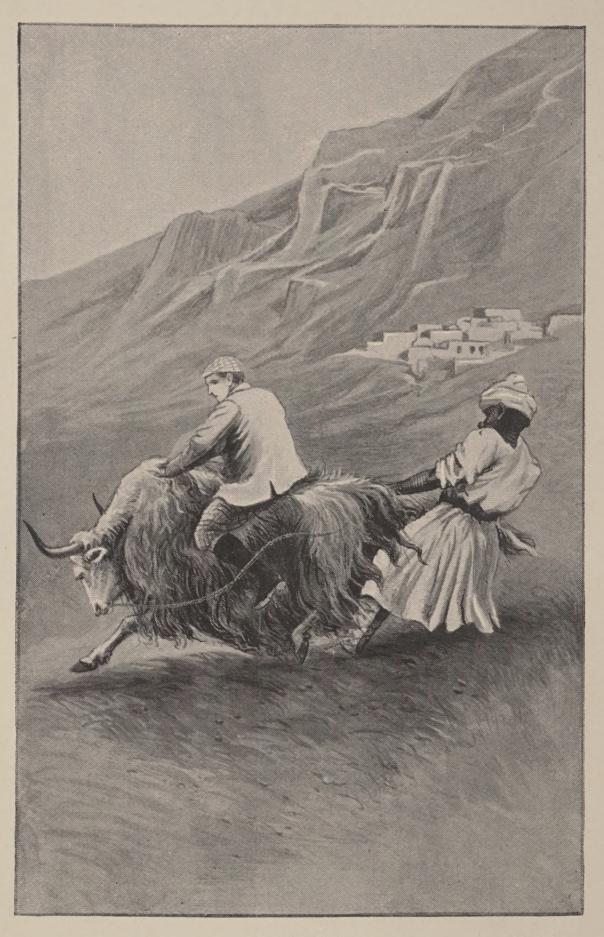
If the sudden scattering of the little group was funny to witness, the scene that now ensued was far more amusing.

Kent had no difficulty in retaining his seat, thanks to the thickness of hair on the animal's humped shoulders, and did not feel the least bit alarmed, for they were on a comparatively level bit of ground, and there were no chasms ahead.

As for Bunty, he was manifestly enjoying himself famously, a vast grin irradiating his homely features, while he pulled back on the yak's tail with a vigour that threatened to have it out by the roots.

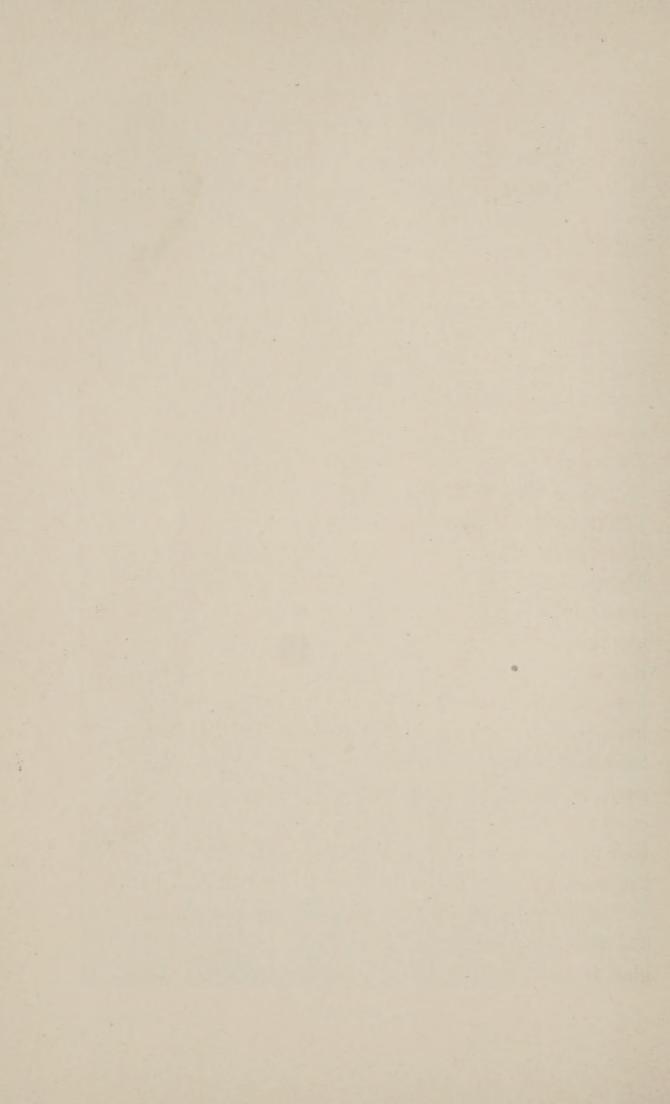
The village folks flocked from their houses to see the fun, and Mr. Stannard, having no fear for his boy's safety, was so overcome with the absurdity of the whole thing that he could scarcely stand up for laughing.

After careering down the valley in this wild fashion for the space of a couple of hundred yards, the yak began to let up. Into its slow brain had come the question as to what all the fun was about any way, and whether there was any sense in its exerting itself to such an extent. It accordingly slackened its pace until it came down to a walk, when Bunty exchanged the tail for the rope at the animal's nose, and thus getting control of it, led it back in triumph.



The Yak Ride.

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That night Mr. Stannard told Kent many interesting things about this curious creature, which cannot live away from the cold, snowy regions of the Himalayas, and therefore has never been seen in any menagerie, however extensive.

"Away up in Chinese Thibet, and in some parts of Ladak, you see the wild yak in his perfection, and he is really a magnificent fellow. There is no harder animal in the world to shoot, and the hunter that can stalk one successfully may well boast of his trophy. The natives have an odd way of hunting them that often succeeds. They dig two pits in the ground at some place frequented by a herd, there being a connecting tunnel between the pits. Then, if the first shot only wounds the yak—and he is as hard to kill as a wild cat—he charges furiously at the hole from which the bullet came, whereupon the hunter scuttles away to the other hole, and fires at him from that. At once the yak turns his attention to the second hole, while the hunter hastens to the first for another shot, and so the game is kept up until at last the noble brute succumbs to many wounds. It's not according to our idea of sport, Kent, but it bags the game, and that's the main point with the natives."

The following day's journey proved so arduous a one that ere it was half over Kent was only too glad to avail himself of the help of the Bos grun-

niens. Usually two days were allowed for the distance between Lippe and Sugnam; but Mr. Stannard was anxious to accomplish it in one, and to do this would require not less than twelve hours of continuous climbing. The path led over the terrible Ruhang Pass, which reaches a height of nearly 15,000 feet, and in crossing its summit it was necessary to ascend, and then descend, over 8000 feet before Sugnam was reached.

All this involved a great deal of difficult and dangerous work. In one place the road, if such it could be called, slanted across the face of an immense slate precipice where one slip of the foot would have meant destruction. So narrow was this pathway that at times Kent had to dismount, and even the saddle had to be taken off the yak in order to get it around a critical corner.

But nothing could have been more comforting than the yak's method of progression. It was slow yet sure with a vengeance. It never put weight upon a hoof until it felt it could rely upon its footing, and it thus crept on with a steadiness that was as admirable as it was reassuring.

The worst part of the day's travel came in the afternoon, when a long and woefully steep ascent led up to a great bank of snow, the first the party had encountered.

High up in the world as they were, the heat and

glare of the sun while passing over the rocks had been trying in the extreme; but as they approached the snow the sky darkened, and a violent wind came sweeping over the summit of the pass from the fields of ice beyond that chilled them to the bone.

By this time they were all more or less weary from the extra fatigue of their forced march, and the rarefied air made breathing difficult. But they dare not halt even for a moment. To have done so would have only added to the perils of their situation. They must press on resolutely until they were beyond the summit, and had got some distance below it, before they could venture to call a halt.

CHAPTER VI

STRANGE VISITORS AT NIGHT

So severe was the toil of conquering the Ruhang Pass that even the Sikh and Goorkha showed signs of faltering, while some of the poor coolies fairly broke down and cried as they staggered along under their burdens, which, after all, were not more than lifty pounds apiece.

But Mr. Stannard's spirits and energy seemed limitless. He poked fun at Champ and Bunty for being no better than a pair of boys, he scolded or cheered the coolies according to his knowledge of their nature, and he had always a helping hand for everybody that might be in difficulties.

He was the first to try the dangerous places, and his example so inspired the others that, in spite of wind and cold and snow, Sugnam was reached ere nightfall without mishap or damage of any kind.

Sugnam being a large village where the people seemed well-to-do, Mr. Stannard decided to rest for a day, in order to recover from their great

exertion. So the tents were pitched in a pleasant place shaded by large willow-trees, while near at hand were abundance of apricot-trees and vines, that gave good promise of bearing big purple grapes in plenty.

Kent lamented that the fruit season was not at hand. Apricots and grapes would have made a very pleasant addition to their rather monotonous bill of fare. But they could hardly wait for the fruit to ripen. So he had to content himself with the hope that on the return journey they would be in good season.

So refreshed was everybody by the day's rest that Mr. Stannard determined upon another forced march. The usual thing was to count from Sugnam to Shaso a short day's journey, and from Shaso to Pu another; but Mr. Stannard would put the two stages into one.

"We're all sound in wind and limb still," he told his party, "and the faster we get on the better for us in every way. There's no telling what accidents or delays may befall us farther on. Let's make hay while the sun shines."

Nor was he content with words of cheer. Whenever he called upon the coolies for any extra exertion, he always added a couple of annas to that day's pay, a recompense which amply atoned for the additional labours they had to endure. From Sugnam to Shaso was comparatively easy going, but there were some spots on the way from Shaso to Pu that tried the nerves and muscles of the travellers severely.

The track ran across the face of tremendous slate precipices, which rose up in a steep slope thousands of feet from the foaming and thundering Sutlej. The weather had worn away the softer parts of the slate in many places, leaving the hardened ends sticking out, and where these protruding portions were close together, long slabs of slate had been laid across them, forming a precarious footpath that a mountain goat might well have refused to trust himself upon. Where these projections were not sufficiently on line, or were too far distant from each other to allow of the slabs being fixed, the travellers had to work their way along as best they could.

If, however, a long gap made this out of the question, ropes of twisted juniper-branches had been stretched from one point to another, upon which slabs of slate were placed, with their inner ends resting on crevices in the precipice wall, thus forming a footpath with many gaps in it, through which a view could be had into awful depths beneath.

Nor was the danger of losing one's footing the only one the mountain-climbers had to face. The

rope-bridges were about as insecure as such things could possibly be, bending and shaking so beneath the strain put upon them that every now and then a slab would drop out, and go clattering down the chasm until smashed to atoms; while from above loose fragments of slate were continually falling, as if the mountain were keeping up a fusillade upon the daring wayfarers.

Kent was very silent during this difficult and dangerous travel. The tremendous sublimity of their surroundings, the sombre jagged precipices all around, the sunless gorge of the Sutlej beneath, the frowning cliffs above, no less than the strain of keeping his place in the little procession of climbers while the hot July sun beat mercilessly upon the bare slate, producing a heat that was almost sickening—these influences tied his tongue, and he plodded along with little more than one thought in his mind—to wit, When would that awful journey come to an end?

The yak had, of course, been dismissed before this part of the route had been entered upon, and Kent had only "shanks' mare" to carry him. But he kept up with really admirable fortitude, winning many a warm word of praise from his father, and materially increasing the respect which the Sikh and Goorkha were coming to entertain for the young Sahib's powers.

But it seemed that he had overcome the toils and trials of that day's travel only to face a more insidious, though no less dangerous, foe which now attacked him. It was in the evening, after dinner—for which, by the way, Kent did not show his wonted appetite—had been disposed of, that the first signs of trouble showed themselves.

He had been feeling strange for some time before saying anything, but at last thought it necessary to speak.

"It seems to me as if I was going to have a sick spell, father," he said. "I'm feeling awfully queer. What can be the matter?"

"I'm afraid I've let you overdo yourself to-day, my boy," responded Mr. Stannard, in a tone of tender self-reproach. "I was so anxious to reach here by sunset that I've not sufficiently considered your young strength."

"Oh, I don't think it's that, father," returned Kent, with a grave attempt at a smile. "I'm tired, of course, but not more than I've been after a football match at school. It's my head that's bothering me, and I've got horrid little pains here," placing his hand upon his stomach.

At this Mr. Stannard looked grave, and taking Kent's hand, felt his pulse, and also pressed his own palm upon his forehead.

"I hope you're not in for an attack of dysentery,

Kent," said he. "But if it should be that, I'm glad to say I've got the right medicine with me."

In the event Mr. Stannard's apprehensions proved well formed. Kent grew much worse during the night, and had to take big doses of ipecacuanha and calomel, which nauseous remedies were almost as hard to stand as the cramps.

Of course no progress could be thought of until Kent had quite recovered, and Mr. Stannard congratulated himself that, since this untoward event had to occur, it came to them when they were so advantageously camped.

Pu was a good-sized village, well situated on the slope of a mountain, and the tents had been pitched on its outskirts in a terraced field, where the apricottrees gave them protection from both sun and wind.

Among the residents of Pu was a Moravian missionary and his wife, and the good woman, as soon as she heard of Kent's condition, became a very angel of mercy to him. They could not converse, because he spoke only English and French, while she knew German and Thibetan. But she had such a kind, motherly face, and knew so thoroughly how to soothe his fevered pillow, and to tempt his appetite with daintily cooked food, that the motherless boy's heart went out unreservedly to her, and he spoke to her eloquently with his eyes, though he could say nothing with his tongue.

It was a whole week before Kent fully recovered, and during the long night-watches, when he was lying awake, while the others slept soundly, he saw some strange sights—so strange, indeed, that at first he said nothing about them, thinking that they might be the mere figments of his brain, upset for the time by his sufferings. The door of the tent was kept open for the sake of coolness, and the moon being at the full, Kent could see clearly all that went on outside.

His first sensation came from the sight of serpents, big fellows, full six feet long, that went gliding past the tent, happily too intent on some other business to pay him a visit.

Now Kent had heard his father say that there were no snakes in the Himalayas, and at first he thought he was dreaming, but when he not only saw the repulsive things, but actually heard them moving about, he doubted no longer, and, sure enough, the Sikh, happening once to get up through the night, caught sight of a serpent not three yards from the tent, and, uttering an exclamation of horror, crushed its head by a fortunate blow from a stone that he promptly hurled at it.

Other nocturnal visitors were great Thibetan mastiffs belonging to a Lama nunnery higher up the mountain, that used to be let loose at night,

and came down to the tents to prowl about, probably in quest of food.

At the outset Kent did not mind them. Indeed, he liked their coming. He was very fond of dogs, and these huge creatures were the finest of their kind he had ever seen.

There was one especially big fellow of whom he had begun to feel quite fond. In fact, he had quite made up his mind to try and buy him when he got well. But one night he was awakened from a kind of nightmare by finding the dog standing over him with his fore-paw on his chest, while he fumbled at his throat with his tremendous jaws as if about to devour him.

In a trice Kent's growing affection gave way to wild terror, and throwing off the brute by a frantic effort, he shouted, "Father! father! wake up and shoot him!"

Mr. Stannard had the happy faculty of waking at once from sound sleep with all his faculties about him. He responded to Kent's call with wonderful promptitude, and seized his rifle just as the dog, growling fiercely, was retreating from the tent.

Taking rapid aim, he pulled the trigger, and the bullet, traversing nearly the whole length of the mastiff's body, buried itself in the tent. The animal gave one awful roar of mingled rage and agony, and rolled over dead.

After this incident Kent was never left alone at night, Mr. Stannard taking turns with Champ and Bunty in keeping watch beside him.

Yet the most exciting experience was still to come. It was drawing near the close of the week, and Kent was decidedly on the mend. In a couple of days he would be able to resume travelling. Bunty was sitting up with him, and Kent had been sleeping so soundly during the first part of the night that the Goorkha, who had eaten a particularly large dinner of roast mutton and rice, allowed his vigilance to relax, and dozed off, until finally he fell into a profound sleep himself.

A little after midnight Kent woke up, for no particular reason so far as he knew, and glancing through the door of the tent, was surprised to see a very strange-looking figure moving about with the unsteady swaying motion of a drunken man.

There were some Chinese-Tartar pilgrims encamped near the Lama temple, and Kent thought at first it must be one of these arrayed in a clumsy sheepskin coat, who had wandered down while too drunk to know just what he was about. He therefore kept still, for he had no apprehension of danger from that source.

But when the strange object went over to an apricot-tree, and began to climb in a curious

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fashion that certainly was not human, Kent's suspicions were aroused, and he called out, "Bunty, wake up! See what that thing is!"

At the sound of his voice the mysterious creature turned its head—for it had hitherto had its back to the tent—and uttered a ferocious growl that at once gave Kent a clue to its identity. Without doubt it was a bear, and a big one too!

Kent's call awoke not only Bunty, but Mr. Stannard also, and both sprang to their feet, the one grasping his rifle, the other the famous Goorkha knife, with which in the right hand such terrible execution can be done.

The bear was now sending forth menacing growls and grunts that said as plainly as words could have done it, "Touch me, if you dare."

But Mr. Stannard was not one to be intimidated in this fashion. He had promptly come to the conclusion that the midnight visitor was no common-place Indian black bear, nor even a Thibetan bear, but one of the big yellow snow-bears, which rarely descend below the snow-line, and are known to be very fierce and dangerous.

"We must have that fellow, Kent," he said.
"It's the first chance I've had to kill one, and we won't let him off."

By this time the bear had got well up into the

apricot-tree, where the foliage hid him, so that good aim could not be taken.

"Throw some stones at him, Bahadur," ordered Mr. Stannard, and the Goorkha sent a big volley of rocks at the hidden animal. They were at once effective; for, resuming his growling, which he had given over when he began eating the fruit, the bear promptly started to descend again to give battle to his challengers.

Sitting up in bed, Kent had a full view of the whole proceedings, and watched them with intense interest, not altogether free from concern lest his father might suffer some harm.

Tail first the great clumsy creature came down the tree-trunk, halting every yard or two to turn its head towards the tent and give a thunderous growl that meant plainly: "Take advantage of me now, if you dare. I'll make you suffer for it the moment I get my four feet on the ground again."

"Why don't you fire at him, father?" screamed Kent, quivering with excitement.

But Mr. Stannard was waiting until the bear should expose his full front, and thus present a target that could hardly be missed.

Bunty stood at his side, his heavy, keen-edged knife in hand, ready to decapitate the creature at one blow if he got a good chance.

As Mr. Stannard expected, the bear, on reaching

the ground, reared upon its hind-legs to face its assailants. This was the hunter's opportunity. Aiming carefully at the shaggy beast, he pulled the trigger, confident that with the report the bear would pitch forward stone-dead.

But whether owing to the uncertain light, or to a trembling of the nerves due to the midnight disturbance, Mr. Stannard's wonted accuracy failed him for once, and the leaden messenger did not find its way straight to the animal's heart. With a quickness almost incredible in so large and heavy a creature, the bear, dropping on to its four feet, charged furiously at Mr. Stannard.

The latter had no time to reload, or to snatch up another rifle, but clubbing the one he had, he brought it down with all his might upon the bear's head. It was a blow that might have felled an ox, yet the bear hardly seemed to feel it, and the next instant he had knocked Mr. Stannard down and was standing over him growling horribly.

Mr. Stannard might have avoided his fierce charge, indeed, but to have done so would have left undefended the tent where Kent lay helpless, and this his father's heart could not for a moment consider.

As Kent saw him fall he sprang out of bed himself, crying to the Goorkha, "Save him, Bunty!—oh, save him!"

The plucky fellow needed no such appeal. He had only been waiting for the right moment to intervene. Darting forward, he swung his huge knife on high, and with a thrilling swish it descended upon the bear's neck just behind the ears.

He could not have done it more scientifically if he had taken long minutes instead of a brief second to get his aim. The flashing blade shore through fur and flesh, snapping the spinal cord and wellnigh severing the head from the body. Without even a final growl the bear sank down dead, beyond a peradventure.

"Father! father! are you hurt? Did the bear bite you?" cried Kent, standing at the tent door, and looking like a ghost in the moonlight.

Mr. Stannard, throwing off the inert body that pressed heavily upon him, rose up and shook himself.

"Hurt, Kent—not a bit, thank God! although I did come down rather hard on these stones. Go back to bed, my boy, or you'll be getting worse again."

Quite relieved by his father's cheery tone, Kent went back to his cot, while Mr. Stannard and the Goorkha proceeded to examine their prize. It proved to be an unusually fine specimen of the Ursus Isabellinus, one of the most savage of its kind, and Mr. Stannard felt very proud indeed of having bagged it with Bunty's aid.

"I know many a white shikari that would envy me this night's work, Kent," said he exultantly when the heavy carcass had been hung up to the tree, so as to be out of the way of the dogs that were so continually prowling around. "Why, my boy, it is not unusual for one of those fellows to pull down a yak and make a meal off him if he gets the chance, which he does in midsummer, when the yaks are sent up to the heights to graze. I haven't had a kill for some time that gave me as much satisfaction as this one."

This was the last of Kent's nocturnal disturbers, and the remaining nights of their stay at Pu were quiet enough, but they were all none the less glad when his complete recovery enabled them to proceed again.

Their next stopping-place of importance would be Shipki, just across the borders of Chinese Thibet, and Mr. Stannard was anxious to reach it as soon as possible, for there would be decided the momentous question whether they would be permitted to enter the mysterious region to which it was the gateway, or be compelled to turn away baffled from the portal at which so many before them had applied in vain.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE GATEWAY OF THIBET

BIDDING farewell to the kind missionary and to his wife, whose motherly attention had helped so much in bringing Kent back to health, and not forgetting to make them presents that they highly appreciated, the travellers set out from Pu in high spirits.

While their journey was undoubtedly growing more difficult, it was also increasing in interest, and if it should be that they could slip past Shipki unchallenged, or obtain permission to pass by any diplomacy, and thus make their way to the strange city of Lh'asa, the jealously guarded capital of the Thibetan empire, then would the purpose of their expedition be gloriously accomplished.

"But I confess I am far from sanguine as to getting past Shipki," said Mr. Stannard to Kent as they talked together over their plans. "Why those ugly, dirty heathens should be so afraid of letting Europeans see their capital beats my comprehension. We certainly don't want to take it from them. It would be of no use to us whatever, and they have

everything to gain by opening their country to commerce. But they're as obstinate as they are dirty. However," he added, brightening up, "perhaps they may let us through; and if they do, we'll certainly push on to Lh'asa, and if we succeed in reaching it, Kent, you'll be able to boast of being the first English boy to set foot inside its walls."

Kent's eyes glistened and his cheeks flushed. "Wouldn't that be splendid, father?" he exclaimed.

"It would, my boy," responded Mr. Stannard.

"But don't set your heart too much upon it. The chances are about nine to one that we shall be turned back."

It was a good two days' march to Shipki, and they made it without accident or incident of special sort. In crossing the Sutlej river at Dubling they made their first acquaintance with the sangpa, a curious kind of wooden bridge, which is supposed to have suggested the cantilever principle, on which the famous Forth Bridge and other great structures of the kind have been built.

Mr. Stannard pointed out to Kent how cleverly the native builders had done their work, great beams being pushed out from each side of the gorge one over the other, with their shore-ends securely weighted down, until they came close enough together to permit of their extremities being joined by long planks. There was no sign of a railing,

and the bridge, being but three feet broad and decidedly shaky, while the river rushed roaring nearly a hundred feet below it, called for a sure foot and a steady head to cross it safely.

All of Mr. Stannard's party got over without mishap, but just behind them came a Tartar merchant, returning to his home beyond the border, who had a big yak laden with goods. This animal took it into his stupid head to balk just when it reached the middle of the bridge, and the most strenuous efforts of the man who was leading it by the nosering, supplemented by the frantic shouting of the merchant, who brought up the rear, availed nothing to make it move on.

Though powerless to render any assistance, Mr. Stannard and those with him waited to see what would be the end of the matter.

The old bridge had been shaky enough under their weight, but with the great bulk of the yak bearing heavily upon it, it swayed and cracked in a manner ominously prophetic of an early collapse.

There was a comical aspect to the affair that Kent was quick to appreciate.

"Just see what a state of excitement that chap's in," he said laughingly. "If he don't take care he'll be over the bridge himself."

"I imagine you would be pretty well worked up too," replied his father, "if all you were worth in the world was on the back of that provoking brute."

The Tartar merchant certainly presented a moving picture as he raged away at the stubborn animal, no doubt aspersing its ancestors unto the third and fourth generation, and bespeaking maledictions upon its posterity in like measure.

For full ten minutes the great creature stood as motionless as if cast in bronze. Then, as though stung by a hornet, it suddenly plunged forward, causing the man in front to narrowly escape a tumble over the side of the bridge in his effort to get out of its way, and letting the merchant, who had been shoving behind with all his might, fall forward on his face, to the serious detriment of his nose, which got a nasty scrape against the rough planks.

But that was not the worst of the matter. In thus darting forward, the yak, unaccustomed to any such rash and rapid movements, lost its footing, and amid the loud wails of master and driver, lurched heavily off the bridge into the raging torrent far below.

"Bless my heart! that's too bad," exclaimed Mr. Stannard, in a tone of genuine sympathy. "I'm afraid that's a hopeless case."

"He's gone for sure," said Kent, pressing forward to the end of the chasm to see the last of the unfortunate yak.

But neither of them knew how much Bos grunniens could stand. At the first plunge the clumsy creature vanished out of sight, only to emerge again fifty feet farther down, and to strike out bravely for life.

"Just look at him, father!" cried Kent, dancing about in his excitement. "He can swim like a duck."

True enough, the yak evidently could swim astonishingly well, and Mr. Stannard, glancing down the stream saw an eddy just below from which, if the animal got into it, there might be some chance of a rescue.

"Come along, Kent," said Mr. Stannard; "that fellow may be pulled out after all."

Whether the yak had sufficient instinct or intelligence to take in the situation it would be hard to say. As a matter of fact, it struggled towards the eddy, and succeeded in reaching it, thus escaping the merciless grasp of the torrent.

Mr. Stannard, accompanied by Kent and the two servants, besides a number of the coolies, now addressed themselves to the task of getting the animal out of its precarious position, its owner and driver looking on with intense interest, but not offering the slightest help. It was a tough job; but Mr. Stannard was not one to give up in a hurry anything he undertook, and at the end of

an hour the yak was up on the river-bank again, very little the worse for its rough experience.

The merchant's gratitude was quite embarrassing. If Mr. Stannard had been minded to take literally what he said, his possessions would have been rescued from the torrent only to be the reward of their rescuer.

But Mr. Stannard would have nothing save thanks, and leaving the man to examine his goods, and see how much they had suffered from the mishap, he went his way, quite content with his part in the transaction.

They camped in a terraced field a little beyond Namgea, where water and firewood were in abundance. Here the view outspread before them was indescribably grand. They were themselves at a height of over twelve thousand feet, but right in front, from the opposite bank of the Sutlej, rose the mountain called Lio Porgyul, so sheer and stark that a stone could be rolled from its summit, twenty-three thousand feet in height, down into the waters of the river running ten thousand feet below its snow-capped peak. This glorious mountain sent so many towers and aiguilles up into the cold, clear air that it reminded Mr. Stannard of Milan Cathedral.

"That's a sight worth travelling far to see, even over such rough roads as we've had to put up with, isn't it, Kent?" he said enthusiastically, as they watched the wonderful play of the departing sunlight upon the mountain's vari-coloured flank.

"It is indeed, father," replied Kent; "and I'm so glad you let me come with you. I'm enjoying every bit of the way."

Mr. Stannard gave his son a look of profound pride and affection.

"You're a regular chip of the old block, my boy," he said, throwing his arm about him. "You've got my taste for travel, and for seeing strange places and people. If your poor dear mother were still alive, I'm afraid we would fill her heart with anxiety;" and then, the sense of his bereavement coming over him afresh at the mention of his dear wife, his eyes filled with tears, and he said no more.

But Kent understood, and taking his father's hand, he pressed it tenderly between his own, in gentle, silent sympathy. There was something very beautiful about the perfect mutual understanding that existed between the father and son. It seldom found expression in words or deeds, but it was the very atmosphere in which they lived, and they rarely held any difference of opinion that was of consequence.

But if Lio Porgyul was impressive by day, it became almost overpowering at night, when the moon was slowly rising behind the dark precipice, on a shelf of which the camp had been pitched.

Before it became visible itself, the orb of night's white rays lit up the deep gorges of the Spiti river, and bathed in silvery splendour the multitudinous towers and battlements of the mighty mountain. "It did not at all appear as if any external light were falling, but rather as if the great castle of the gods, being transparent as alabaster, were lighted up from within, and shone in its own radiance, throwing its supernatural light on the savage scene around."

So magnificent was the effect, and with such skill did it seem to be managed, that Kent could hardly be blamed for being reminded of a marvellous transformation scene that had struck him spell-bound with admiration in a Christmas pantomime at the Adelphi the previous winter. His father was much amused at his making any comparison between the glorious work of Nature and the paltry imitation of man, but Kent stuck manfully to it that the latter was by no means to be despised.

In getting from the Namgea fields to Shipki it was necessary to reach an altitude of some sixteen thousand feet, and fearing that the exertion involved would be rather too much for Kent, Mr. Stannard obtained for him the use of a yak, which Kent was only too glad to ride.

The creature moved with exasperating slowness,

grunting protests at every step, but it was as sure as it was slow, and it kept on steadily without stopping to rest.

Bunty, most of whose life had been spent among the mountains of Nepaul, did not seem to mind the stiff climbing at all, his tongue going incessantly as he trotted along.

But the tall Sikh found it very hard work, the rarefied air being so difficult to breathe that he was attacked with a bleeding at the nose, which scared him a good deal until Mr. Stannard reassured him.

The latter led the way with seemingly tireless step, neither the thinness of the air nor the difficulties of the path giving him any concern.

During the middle of the day the heat reflected from the bare rock, upon which the sun poured down with unsparing energy, was very harassing; but when at length the summit of the path was reached, and they halted upon the open brow of the mountain, which here was covered with grass and flowers, they felt fully repaid for the toils of the ascent. A superb panorama unrolled itself before their eyes as they gazed north, south, east, and west, the most remarkable feature being the gigantic semicircle of appalling precipices, lofty rock-peaks, and snowy summits more than twenty thousand feet high.

Kent, having ridden at his ease on the yak,

while the others toiled on foot, set off in quest of flowers while they rested for a spell, and brought back to his father a beautiful bouquet of blue Alpine blossoms, whose loveliness was enhanced by the savage grandeur of the surroundings amid which they ventured to bloom.

About the middle of the afternoon they came to the Thibetan boundary, and from the extreme summit of the pass had a clear view into Tartary, the strange region that was the goal of their expedition.

It presented to their eyes a great expanse of bare and rounded, but smooth-looking, hills, fading away into the elevated plane beyond. Hardly a tree was visible, and there were no high peaks nor abrupt precipices. Here and there were great patches of dark brown furze that bore a strong resemblance to Scotch heather.

Kent, who had spent a summer in the Highlands, noticed this, and drew his father's attention to it.

"You're quite right, Kent," he responded. "It does certainly look very much like a Scotch moor in those places; but," he added, sweeping his hand around the wide scene, "the rest of it is very different from dear old Scotland, isn't it?"

And certainly there was nothing in Scotland to be compared to the wild sterility of those Tartary plains, or to the tremendous mass of Lio Porgyul.

Six thousand feet in direct descent from where they stood lay the large village of Shipki, and they could see the inhabitants moving about on their terraced fields, or resting on their house-tops, and looking more like ants than human beings.

"That's where our fate will be decided, Kent," said Mr. Stannard, with a grave expression; "and I'm by no means confident as to the result, for if the people refuse to supply us with yaks and coolies we've got to turn back."

It was a very tiresome and dreary business getting down to Shipki, anticipating which, Mr. Stannard had sent the Sikh and Goorkha on ahead with the tents, so that they might be all ready for them to rest on their arrival.

Great, therefore, was their disappointment, on reaching the village completely done out, to find not only that the tents were not put up, but that the chance of their being so seemed decidedly small.

Provoking as it was, the situation was not without its amusing aspect, which helped to keep Mr. Stannard in good humour while he set himself to solve the problem presented.

The village of Shipki stood on the steep slope of a hill above a foaming river, and was remarkably deficient in level ground; in fact, the only level place was the roofs of the houses and the long terraced fields, the entrances to which were jealously guarded by prickly hedges or stout stone walls.

Now, it is not practicable to pitch a tent on the side of a hill covered with big stones, and having a slope of 45°, so that the choice lay between the roof of a house and a terraced field; and just here came the dilemma that Champ and Bunty had found facing them. Upon every house-top stood a ferocious Thibetan mastiff, bristling with eagerness to attack the strangers; while, whenever the tent-carriers sought to enter one of the fields, their way was barred by a band of handsome and sturdy young Tartar women, clad in red and black tunics, loose trousers, and immense cloth hoods, who not only placed their bulky persons in opposition to any entrance, but even showed fight.

Such was the condition of affairs when Mr. Stannard arrived; the stalwart Sikh still stately and dignified, although the flash of his eye betrayed his anger, and the more excitable Goorkha dodging this way and that, and laying his hand upon his terrible knife with a significance that was unmistakable.

"Hello! what's the matter now?" inquired Mr. Stannard, with a half-perplexed, half-amused expression. "What have you been saying to

the ladies that they are giving you so warm a reception?"

Chunna Lal hastened to explain that all his efforts to find a suitable camping-place had been foiled by the belligerent damsels, who were evidently resolved that the travellers should find no resting-spot within the borders of the village.

Seeing how the wind blew, and understanding better than his servants the real state of affairs, Mr. Stannard, assuming his most conciliatory manner, strove to obtain by diplomacy, and the offer of liberal payment, the privilege his men had failed to secure by arguments or a show of force.

But the Tartar women were obdurate. If the Sahibs wanted to camp, there was a capital place just half-way up the mountain-side down which they had just come, and there was plenty of time to get back there before nightfall.

Meanwhile groups of men seated on the roofs of the houses were watching the proceedings with lively interest. They were quite willing that the women should do all the talking and block the purpose of the white visitors, but they were none the less ready to resent any insult or violence that might be offered to their brawny wives or daughters.

Kent began to get alarmed. It seemed hopeless to carry the day when men, women, and dogs

were all so unanimous in obstruction, so he said to his father—

"Hadn't we better go back? It might not be safe to stay here all night any way."

But Mr. Stannard's resources were not yet exhausted. He had espied a Lama coming slowly down the street, and in the hope that he might prove more tractable than the rest of the villagers, he hastened to meet him. Nor was his confidence misplaced. The Lama promptly took the travellers' part, and in default of obtaining better quarters, offered them a field of his own, which, although very limited in size, yet, with a little management, proved adequate for the accommodation of the whole party.

Strange to say, on their taking possession of this plot, the villagers, finding themselves outwitted, instead of showing resentment, took their discomfiture quite good-humouredly, even the dogs ceasing their angry growlings and seeming resigned to the situation.

"They're not such a bad lot after all," said Mr. Stannard. "Perhaps it may not be so hard a job as I feared getting into Thibet."

But in speaking thus he was reckoning without his host, as the events of the morrow would show only too plainly.

CHAPTER VIII

TURNED BACK FROM TARTARY

At Shipki the obligations of the coolies and yakmen who had been Mr. Stannard's carriers ended, and nothing would induce them to go farther. They were anxious to return to their homes, and neither entreaties nor money had any influence upon them.

Moreover, they assured Mr. Stannard that they did not dare to go on; for, if the Tartars did not fall upon them then, they would certainly do so at the first opportunity. They therefore hastened to betake themselves homeward soon after daybreak, leaving Mr. Stannard with only Chunna Lal and Bahadur Kanwar to assist him.

Now, even if these two had been willing to act as carriers, which, however, they were not, they would have been entirely inadequate to the task. Not less than a dozen coolies were absolutely necessary, and to obtain these Mr. Stannard turned to the Tartars.

Only then did the full difficulties of his situa-

tion reveal themselves to him. The people of Shipki with one consent laughed at his endeavouring to go farther into their country, and flatly refused to give him any assistance whatever.

On being pressed to explain their curious conduct, seeing that Mr. Stannard was only a harmless traveller, with nothing more in view than his own amusement or information, they stated that they had express orders from the Lh'asa Government not to let any Europeans pass, and that it would be as much as their lives and properties were worth to allow them to do so.

They even took the trouble to enter into particulars as to the dreadful modes of torture and death—such as crucifying, ripping open the body, pressing and cutting out the eyes, and burying in the ground with only the head exposed, to be a prey to all kinds of insects—which might be visited upon them if they disobeyed the Government's orders.

Mr. Stannard took it for granted that there was a good deal of exaggeration about all this, and spent a whole day arguing with the chief men of the village. But it proved a waste of time and breath. The Tartars were as obdurate as the rocks around them, and at the end of the day Mr. Stannard had to give up the job of overcoming their opposition as hopeless.

"It's no use, Kent," he said, with a deep sigh,

that showed how keen was his disappointment. "They won't let us go ahead. We'll have to go up to Kashmir instead.

Kent did his best to look sympathetically sorrowful at his father's discomfiture, but in his heart he was rather glad of it. From what little he had seen of the Tartars and their country, he was quite satisfied without any further acquaintance; and, moreover, he was very anxious to see the Happy Valley of Kashmir, concerning which famous place he had heard enough to fire his imagination and excite his curiosity to a high pitch.

Had the Tartars been content with passive resistance to Mr. Stannard's progress, their conduct would have been provoking enough; but when they resorted to more active measures, the consequences narrowly escaped being serious, if not, indeed, fatal, to some of those concerned.

It would appear that they had misgivings lest Mr. Stannard should push forward in spite of them, and they therefore resolved to give him such a fright that he would be only too glad to retrace his steps as rapidly as possible. Accordingly they decided upon a night-attack on the little encampment.

Not feeling altogether safe amidst such inhospitable folk, Mr. Stannard had directed the Sikh and Goorkha to take watch by turns during the

night, and both men were too apprehensive of danger themselves to leave any doubt as to their being alert sentinels.

The moon, already far in decline, was obscured by masses of cloud, and the dark stillness of the night was broken only by the deep bay of some sleepless mastiff, or the rattle and crash of small rock-avalanches on the mountain-side, when the keen eyes of the Goorkha, whose turn it was to be on guard, detected a human head lifted cautiously over the stone wall at the rear of the tents.

He was himself so concealed by the shadow of the tents as to be invisible, and, knowing this, he waited for further development before giving the alarm. It might be only some sneak-thief, with no more fell design than to steal the first thing of the Sahibs that he could lay his hands upon.

Everything was so quiet about the little camp that the nocturnal visitor was evidently encouraged, and gave a signal which caused several other heads to show up beside his own.

"Ha! ha!" said Banty under his breath; "this is beginning to look serious. I must rouse the others."

Creeping carefully about, he first woke up the Sikh, and then Mr. Stannard and Kent, explaining in a low whisper what he had seen.

Mr. Stannard instantly determined to put a bold

front on the matter, although he had no idea as to the strength of the disturbers of his rest. Rifle in hand, he stepped out before the tents, the others standing by him similarly armed, and demanded in a peremptory tone that betrayed not the slightest sense of nervousness—

"Who are you? and what do you want here?"

For answer a number of dark forms appeared suddenly from behind the walls, and the loud report of several matchlocks rang out with startling reverberation.

Involuntarily the two servants and Kent ducked their heads as though to dodge the bullets, but Mr. Stannard never flinched.

"All together now. Fire!" he cried, levelling his rifle at the place whence the firing had come.

With remarkable promptitude the others obeyed, and almost as one the crack of the four rifles made reply to the matchlocks.

The instant the latter had gone off the Tartars vanished behind the wall, so that the rifles did no execution. And this was precisely what Mr. Stannard intended. He had no desire for bloodshed. On the contrary, he was extremely anxious to avoid it. But he knew very well that the best way to prevent any such catastrophe was to show himself ready to fight desperately in his own defence.

Following close upon the volley from the rifles, Mr. Stannard shouted, "Now then, after them! Keep together!" and the others again obeying without a moment's hesitation, the gallant little band dashed across the terraced field, with their rifles in hand, ready for use as clubs if need be.

So daring a response to an attack that was confidently expected to throw its objects into a panic turned the tables upon the Tartars with a vengeance, and giving vent to shouts and grunts of terror, they fled precipitately into the darkness.

Content with the advantage thus gained, Mr. Stannard made no attempt to follow them, but during the remainder of that night not an eye was closed in the tents. With rifles and revolvers loaded, all four sat watching, ready for the first sign of a renewal of the attack.

But the Tartars made no further attempt. The first had shown them clearly enough that the Sahibs were not to be caught napping, and as their real purpose was only to give them a bad scare, they had no idea of risking their precious lives again.

Through it all Kent bore himself with such composure that his father felt bound to give him warm praise.

"You acted like a veteran, Kent," he said, with

an applauding clap upon his shoulders, "though it was your first time to be under fire."

Kent blushed to the roots of his hair with pleasure at the compliment.

"I was a good deal scared all the same, you know," he replied. "But I wouldn't have these rascals know it for the world. Do you think they'll come at us again, father?"

"I doubt if they will," responded Mr. Stannard.
"The more I think of it, the more convinced I am that they did it only to frighten us away. They just want to cure us of our crazy notion of penetrating any farther into their country, which they are so strangely anxious to shut us out from."

That Mr. Stannard's reading of the situation was correct the following morning showed; for, while they were at breakfast, the headman of the village, attended by three companions, appeared, and assuming utter unconsciousness of the events of the preceding night, graciously inquired if the Sahibs wished to hire bearers and yaks to take them back whence they had come.

"You see I was right in my suspicions, Kent," said Mr. Stannard, as soon as the village embassy had made known their business. "That little demonstration last night was their pleasant way of giving us notice to quit."

"And what will you do about it, father?" asked

Kent eagerly, for he was indeed impatient to get away from Shipki, where the men, women, and dogs united in being so inhospitable.

"Well," replied Mr. Stannard, with evident reluctance, "I think perhaps it is better that we should accept their notice, although I confess it goes much against my grain to do so."

"Will we go back to Simla, then?" inquired Kent.

"Why, no, my boy; if we can't get into Thibet, we shall go up to Kashmir," responded Mr. Stannard. "We've got plenty of time to reach there before there's any risk of being snowed up, and we can stay there all winter if we like."

"Oh! that will be splendid, father!" exclaimed Kent enthusiastically. "Let us start right away."

There being nothing to gain by waiting, Mr. Stannard engaged what coolies he required, as well as a couple of yaks, and about the middle of the morning they turned back from Shipki, and retraced their way to the Namgea Fields.

"I'll carry out my purpose of seeing Lh'asa yet, in spite of those stupid, obstinate fellows," said Mr. Stannard, with considerable show of feeling, as he looked down at the village, and away off across the windy steppes of Tartary. "That is not the only way of getting into the country. There's a still better way through China, and some day or other, my boy, you and I will try it."

"All right, father," replied Kent heartily. "Where thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge, as Ruth said to Naomi. It would certainly be a great satisfaction to get to Lh'asa after the way we've been treated."

From Namgea Fields the way leads across the Sutlej river, and over a shoulder of the great mountain Lio Porgyul, and at the crossing of the Sutlej, Kent made his first acquaintance with a jhula in a way he was not likely to soon forget.

The jhula is a kind of bridge peculiar to the Himalayas, and certainly not worth imitating by any other part of the world. It is constructed in this fashion. Two ropes of twisted beach-twigs about the thickness of a man's thigh are stretched across the torrent at a distance of from four to six feet from each other, while between them, but some three feet lower, runs a similar rope, which is connected with the two upper ones by more slender ropes placed at intervals of five feet.

The whole affair sags in the middle in a most unpleasant fashion, and sways to and fro alarmingly with every blast of the high wind which prevails in the Himalayas during the day.

Now the upper ropes of this curious contrivance, which would seem specially intended to test the nerves of the wayfarers, are so thick and rough that they can with difficulty be grasped by the hand, and yet it is not safe to rest the feet on the lower rope except where it is supported by the transverse ones; while, finally, in the very centre of the *jhula*, just where the ropes are farthest apart, there is a cross-bar of wood to keep the two main ropes separate, and this has to be climbed over.

The proper way to manage a *jhula* is to cross it with a continuous but not too rapid motion, suiting one's step, so far as possible, to the swaying of the structure.

Mr. Stannard had had many previous experiences with these bridges, and after explaining to Kent how they were to be crossed, he went ahead to show him the way, reaching the other side without difficulty.

Taking courage from his good example, Kent set forth bravely, and got along all right until he came to the middle of the bridge, where the crossbar had to be got over. As it chanced, while he was doing this a sudden blast of wind rushed roaring down the gorge, and not only made the jhula sway most perilously, so that Kent was fain to hold on for dear life, but it blew out his coat, and caused the tail of it to catch on a twig just behind him.

Kent tried to tear himself free, but both cloth

and twig were too strong for him, and only his hands could extricate him.

His position at once became one of extreme peril. He could not for an instant let go the ropes with either hand in order to free his coat, yet he could not go forward another inch until he was free. Naturally he tried to extricate himself by moving backwards, but this availed nothing, for the strong wind had so twisted the cloth in among the twigs that neither forward nor backward motion had any effect upon their tenacious grip of it.

For a moment he thought of getting out of his coat, and leaving it on the bridge, and had the frail structure been still for a moment, it is possible he might have accomplished this. But, instead of keeping still, it was swaying with such violence that poor Kent could scarcely maintain his position by the utmost use of both hands, and to let go with either for an instant was out of the question.

Far below, the fierce waters of the Sutlej foamed and roared as if eager for their prey, and the tumultuous torrent made him so dizzy that he did not dare look down, but kept his eyes fixed on the brink, where his father stood in an agony of apprehension.

Mr. Stannard knew not what to do in the

emergency. He could not go to his son's assistance, because the *jhula*, already half rotten from long neglect, could not possibly bear their double weight, and for the same reason neither the Sikh nor the Goorkha could render any service.

The latter had, indeed, with noble disregard of the risk to himself, started out on the bridge; but Mr. Stannard, seeing how ominously it bent, had ordered him to go back, lest it should break away altogether.

All that Mr. Stannard could do was to cry cheeringly, "Keep cool, Kent. Don't be frightened. We'll get you over all right yet;" and to lift up his heart in earnest prayer that Providence would indicate some way of saving his son.

It often appears that Providence employs strange instruments to effect its purposes, and in this case the service so passionately sought came from a most unexpected source. Among the bearers was the wife of one of the zemindars, or landholders, who, hearing of the good wages offered by Mr. Stannard, had thriftily determined to earn an honest penny for herself.

She was short of stature, as are nearly all Tartar women, but although somewhat slenderly built, possessed an unusual degree of strength and activity; so that when Mr. Stannard, out of consideration for her sex, would have her carry only

half the load of a man, she, moved probably more by fear of getting only half-wages than by any desire to assert woman's rights, insisted upon being allotted a full load, which she bore with gay indifference.

She had been watching Kent with deep interest, and wondering no doubt how he would succeed in extricating himself. Although she could not understand what Mr. Stannard was shouting across the chasm, her intelligence was keen enough to reveal to her its purport, and presently there stirred within her soul a strange impulse to heroism.

Well she knew the peril of adding even her light weight to that frail fabric that sagged and swayed so alarmingly as Kent strove to break loose from the twigs which held him fast.

But even clearer was the conviction that she alone of all the party could venture to go to his assistance. Accustomed to the crossing of jhulas from her childhood, she thoroughly understood the business, and her experience was now to be put to such a test as it had never stood before.

Casting aside everything that might add to her weight, she called out in her own language, "Keep still, Sahib; I am coming to help you," and with extreme carefulness started out on the jhula.

"God be thanked!" cried Mr. Stannard fervently, clasping his hands in the agony of his anxiety, and bending far over the brink of the cliff to watch her cautious yet steady progress. "If any one can help my boy, she can."

CHAPTER IX

PERILS BY THE WAY

Moving in that continuous gliding manner which best suits the treacherous jhula, the Tartar woman soon reached Kent, and with a quick, deft sweep of her hand, disengaged his coat from where it had been caught.

"Be quick now, Sahib," she commanded. "Get to the other side."

Kent needed no urging. Through it all he had retained his self-command remarkably well, and the moment he was freed he resumed the progress which had been so summarily stayed.

His father's heart stood still as he saw how the jhula bent beneath the double weight, but he forbore to say a word. With arms outstretched, he stood at the end of the bridge, and the moment Kent was within reach he caught hold of him and swung him up beside him, while Champ and Bunty gave the best imitation of a British cheer they could raise.

As soon as Kent had safely landed, the little

woman went back for her load and brought it over, her homely countenance betraying no more excitement or pride than if she had done nothing out of the ordinary run of duty. But Mr. Stannard and Kent showered their warm thanks upon her; and the former, saying in a jocular tone, although the tears of grateful joy filled his eyes, "You certainly deserve a medal for your heroic action, you blessed little woman; and you shall have one, and a gold one at that," took from his pocket-book a fine spade guinea that he had long carried as a sort of luckpenny, and placed it in her hands.

The black eyes of the brave little Tartar beamed with delight, and indicating by signs, as well as by her words, that she would never allow this precious coin to be spent, but would treasure it as her own special possession, she made it very clear that she considered herself quite adequately rewarded for her plucky service.

Kent crossed many a jhula in the course of his further travels through the Himalayas, but happily had no repetition of his experience at this one, though some of them were in shocking bad condition, and seemed to be only awaiting the slightest excuse in order to tumble into the roaring torrent or hideous chasm over which they were flung.

But he never forgot the passage of the Sutlej

jhula. That always remained in his memory as one of the most thrilling experiences of his life.

The remainder of the party having got over without loss of life or baggage, the march was continued as far as Gyumur, a charming spot on the side of Lio Porgyul, nearly twelve thousand feet above sea-level.

It was very pretty at Gyumur, the place having many terraced fields and plenty of willow-trees, with rills of pure water running through meads of soft, thick green grass. Moreover, the mountain gave shade from the heat of the sun, and allowed the travellers to spend a long, cool, pleasant afternoon, which they heartily appreciated after the toils and perils of the earlier part of the day.

Not far from their camping-place was a large Lama monastery, which Mr. Stannard took Kent to visit. They saw a number of the Lamas, who showed little or no interest in the strangers, though some of them possibly had never seen Europeans before. For a moment they would lift their dark, dreamy eyes, and give the visitors a far-away look, and then drop their lids without manifesting the faintest degree of curiosity.

"What a queer lot they are!" said Kent as they came away from the monastery. "What good are they in any way, father?"

"It would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer to

answer that question, my son," replied Mr. Stannard. "So far as I can see, more idle, useless creatures than these Lamas do not exist. They do nothing for the good of their fellows, and they hide themselves away up here among the mountains, where even a good example, supposing they should set one, would be utterly wasted."

"Theirs must be a very comfortable kind of religion, though, father," said Kent. "If the Christian religion were like that, there soon wouldn't be any heathen left. They'd all want to be Christians."

"I am not so sure about that, my boy," responded Mr. Stannard, smiling at his son's inference.

"After all, it's only lazy, indolent, cowardly people who can be satisfied with Buddhism."

"Oh, of course," assented Kent. "The people of Europe or of North America could never put up with such a sleepy religion. They must have something with life in it."

Had the Lamas overheard this conversation, carried on by both speakers in a comfortable tone of superiority, it is not likely that they would have resented it in the least. All they wanted was to be let alone, and what the rest of the world might think of them or their religion mattered less than a grain of mustard-seed.

From Gyumur to Nako the way wound along the top of terrific precipices running some five thousand feet almost perpendicularly above the river Lee, and full fourteen thousand feet above sea-level. But Nako itself was prettily situated beside a small lake, and a comfortable camping-place was readily found on a grassy bank.

Here a halt was made for a couple of days in order to secure a fresh lot of coolies, and to lay in supplies, the commissariat department being pretty well exhausted.

The weather was bright and fine, and the servants took the opportunity to indulge in various athletic games, which Kent entered heartily into and enjoyed immensely.

It was very hot at midday, and getting well warmed up by their amusements, longing eyes were cast at the lake, that looked very inviting, with its clear, calm water. Kent said something to his father about having a dip, but Mr. Stannard promptly vetoed the idea.

"Just feel the water and see how icy cold it is," he said. "You'd be almost sure to take a cramp, and then the best of your swimming wouldn't save you."

Although Kent's own opinion was that a bath in the lake would do him no harm, but, on the contrary, would be extremely refreshing, he obeyed his father without protest.

The Goorkha, however, did not take his master

into his confidence as to his intention, and when the racing and wrestling and other sports had come to an end, he ran down to the lake-shore, threw off his clothes, and plunged into the water before Mr. Stannard could interfere.

As soon as he saw Bunty's action he ordered him to return to the shore, but the fellow was splashing and snorting like a porpoise, and did not hear him until he had got full fifty yards from the shore.

Then the deadly chill of the water, which came from the glaciers above, made itself felt, and he quickly gave up the idea he had first entertained of swimming to the other side of the lake. But on turning to retrace his way, he found himself suddenly stricken with a numbness that rendered him well-nigh helpless. It was not so much a cramp as an almost complete loss of power. He could just keep his head above water, but he could not make the slightest progress shoreward.

Mr. Stannard had become somewhat incensed at the Goorkha failing to obey him promptly, but when he saw his terror-stricken countenance and heard his bubbling cry for help, his anger changed at once to sympathy.

"Don't lose your head now!" he shouted to him.

"Keep yourself afloat for a couple of minutes and I'll get you out all right."

"You're not going in after him, are you, father?" asked Kent anxiously, as Mr. Stannard threw off his coat and vest and kicked off his boots.

"That's just what I am going to do, my son," responded Mr. Stannard in a tone that brooked no argument. "Here, lay hold of this rope, and stand ready to pull us ashore if necessary."

Mr. Stannard had caught up a long thin rope used in connection with the tents, and closing his teeth tightly over one end, he threw himself into the water and struck out for the Goorkha.

With quick powerful strokes he made his way to the man, who was just about to sink, when he grasped him by the shoulders.

"Keep quiet, man," he commanded him sternly. "Don't try to take hold of me, or I'll let you drown."

Terrified as Bunty was, he had sufficient sense left to obey, and submitting himself entirely to Mr. Stannard's control, the latter slowly but steadily pushed him towards the shore. It was by no means an easy task, for the merciless cold of the glacier-fed lake laid its numbing grasp upon his strength also.

Then it was that the rope, which he still held fast between his teeth, came into play. Kent had tight hold of it, and the moment he saw his father's stroke slacken he began to pull upon it very

cautiously. An approving nod from Mr. Stannard, who, of course, could not open his mouth to speak, showed him that he was doing right, and so he continued to pull gently yet firmly, thus keeping his father's head above water, and efficiently supplementing his struggles, until presently both men had reached shallow water, and all danger was over.

When Mr. Stannard recovered his breath, he said, with as merry a smile as if he had been in no special danger—

"Well done, Kent! That's the best bit of fishing you've ever done. To land two men at once is certainly a great performance."

Bunty wanted to shower his thanks upon his rescuer, but he would have none of it.

"Say nothing more, my man," said Mr. Stannard; "I did no more than common humanity dictated; but I hope you've learned a lesson in caution you will not speedily forget."

The Goorkha certainly looked as if he had. He was shivering with cold, and still under the influence of his fright, and would never have been taken for the self-satisfied, consequential individual of but a few minutes previous.

While they were at Nako, Kent's fancy was taken by a huge dog that was guarding a flock of sheep on the mountain-side. A more superb specimen of the famous Thibetan mastiff not even Mr.

Stannard had ever seen, and when Kent pressed him eagerly to purchase it, he willingly enough consented.

Strange to say, while bargaining with the owner, who with some difficulty was persuaded to part with the dog for a good round sum, the intelligent creature, apparently divining what was in the wind, suddenly set off up the mountain at the top of its speed, paying no heed whatever to the frantic calls of its master.

Kent was greatly disappointed, fearing he would not see his dog again; but the next morning, as they were about to resume their journey, the shepherd appeared dragging the dog, which resisted stoutly.

Kent welcomed him joyously, and, in his impulsive way, was about to pat the mastiff lovingly on the head, when the great creature snapped at him furiously, and he had a narrow escape from being badly bitten.

"Take care, Kent," cried his father, in no small alarm. "The brute is not to be trusted yet. You must win his heart first."

For days to come this seemed a hopeless task. So fierce was this dog, and so eager to use his teeth upon everybody within reach, that it could be managed only by means of a long stick fastened to its neck. Thus secured it was put in charge of the Goorkha, who had a very trying week with it,

for it was continually whining and growling and howling, and pulling back, besides being ever on the alert to make a bolt back to whence it had come.

For two days it utterly refused food, and then, overcome by hunger, it accepted some at Kent's hand. Thereafter Kent fed it regularly, and thus won his way into the creature's affections, until finally Mr. Stannard thought it safe to liberate it, and, sure enough, it was from that hour Kent's shadow by day and sentinel by night.

In view of the new acquisition's splendid proportions and unusual strength, Kent felt justified in calling him Hercules, which, as a matter of course, was soon shortened into Herc.

While Herc became as devoted and docile to Kent as any spaniel, he could never be induced to more than tolerate the others. Towards Mr. Stannard he did, indeed, show a certain amount of respect, but no manifestation of kindness could win from him any really gracious response. His strange wild heart evidently had room for but one occupant at a time, and Kent now filled the place which had been held by the Nako shepherd.

He was in every respect a perfect specimen of his kind, having a grand head, with deep-set eyes, many-wrinkled cheeks, and "flews" worthy of a bloodhound. A coat of long shaggy hair covered his mighty frame, and he carried his large bushy tail curled high over his broad back as if it were a sign of royalty. His colour was a dense black, except for some tan-markings on his head and breast. In size he easily surpassed the biggest St. Bernard Kent had ever seen.

Such was the remarkable pet Kent had secured, and, although he little thought it at the time, this animal was destined to render him signal service on more than one occasion before the end of their long journey over the roof of the world was reached.

The first day's travel was tolerably easy, as the way led over comparatively level ground and there were few ascents and descents to be made. But this pleasant condition of things did not last long, and for several successive days they had mighty hard going, so that Kent was fain to make frequent use of one of the yaks which they still had with them.

Pushing on steadily, however, in spite of all difficulty, the travellers passed out of the dominions of the Rajah of Bussahir, through which they had been journeying, and entered the province of Chumurti, which belonged to Chinese Thibet.

"We shall have to be on the look-out while we are in this part of the country, Kent," said Mr. Stannard, "for we are no longer under the British lion."

"Whose country is this, then, father?" said Kent. "I suppose somebody rules over it."

"It's nominally a part of the possessions of the Chinese dragon," replied Mr. Stannard, "but I'm afraid the Son of Heaven takes very little interest in it, and that the inhabitants respect his authority only so far as seems to them good."

"What sort of people are they, father?" inquired Kent. "Are they any better than those we have already seen?"

"No, indeed," answered Mr. Stannard; "quite the contrary. They're a poor lot compared to them. They are nomads, dwelling in tents instead of villages, and they have a very shady reputation, whether they deserve it or not. But we won't be long in their territory, and will probably be across the border before they know we're here."

"But, father," exclaimed Kent, eager to express the thought that had just occurred to him, "now that we are inside Chinese Thibet, why don't we go ahead to L'hasa? There is nobody to stop us, is there?"

"No, no, my boy," responded Mr. Stannard, shaking his head. "It would be great folly for us to try that. Our presence in the country would soon be discovered, and we'd be treated a good deal more hardly than we were at Shipki."

The camp that night was pitched at To-tzo,

near the river-bank, and Mr. Stannard took care to select the location to provide as far as possible against a night-attack.

"It's better to be sure than sorry," he said.

"There may be nothing worse to fear than flies, which are such a nuisance, but I'll take no chance."

The Sikh and the Goorkha were therefore again detailed to keep watch by turns while the others slept, and Mr. Stannard saw that the rifles and revolvers were all loaded, and ready for immediate use if required.

The night was extremely dark, and there was something so wild and bleak about the surroundings of the camp that when a wind sprang up, and came moaning down the dark valley, joining its weird voice to the roar of the river, the effect upon not only Kent, but his father also, was to give them a feeling of uneasiness and apprehension that kept them awake long after their usual hour for sleep.

But they were both too tired to stay awake all night, and shortly after Champ was heard relieving Bunty, they both fell into a deep dreamless slumber.

They had not been at rest more than an hour, when they were suddenly startled from their sleep by a wild cry of mingled terror and pain, that rang high above the wailing of the wind and the dull roar of the river. Close upon this cry came a commanding shout from Champ of, "Who goes there? Stay where you are, or I'll fire."

And then there followed a confused chorus of unintelligible exclamations and guttural cries, that bespoke the immediate presence of a number of people, into whose midst the Sikh's rifle was presently discharged with a sharp report.

CHAPTER X

MIDNIGHT MARAUDERS

"Have you your rifle ready, and your revolver, Kent?" asked Mr. Stannard, remaining within the tent for a moment to make sure of his own armament. "The Tartars are attacking us, and we must defend ourselves as best we can."

In a voice whose steadiness surprised himself, Kent responded, "Yes, father, I'm all ready. Shall we go out?"

"I will go out, my boy; but at first you keep within the protection of the tent," said Mr. Stannard, stepping out into the night, with his rifle ready for instant use.

In the meantime the uproar had been increased by the addition of Bunty's deep bass voice, and by the frightened cries of the coolies, who had crowded about the tents like a flock of startled sheep.

So dense was the darkness that nothing could be discerned of the midnight disturbers, although their strange noises continued, and they were evidently close at hand.

It was altogether too exciting for Kent to do as his father had bid him, and he too stepped out from the tent, turning a little to the left to try and pierce the obscurity which added so greatly to the terrifying nature of the situation. As he did so he almost fell over Hercules, whose huge form he could just dimly discern as he stood over a dark object that was prostrate on the ground, and uttering pitiful moans of pain and fright.

"What have you here, Herc?" asked Kent anxiously. "Let me see, good dog," and he bent down to examine.

But the mastiff's only response was a savage growl and a crouching closer over his prey; so that, seeing he could do nothing, and fearing lest his interference would do no good, Kent moved off to his father's side.

Mr. Stannard carried a repeating-rifle, and hoping to frighten away the marauders without shedding any blood, he fired three shots from this in close succession in the direction whence most of the sounds seemed to come. This fusillade, which Bunty supported by emptying the whole chambers of his revolver, produced the desired effect. There was a sudden cessation of the guttural cries, and then a sound of feet scampering in panic over the stony ground, followed by a silence broken only by the voices of the wind and the river.

"Thank Heaven, they've bolted!" exclaimed Mr. Stannard, with a vast sigh of relief. "I wonder were any of them hit."

"I don't know about that, father," answered Kent, who through all the commotion had borne himself with wonderful fortitude; "but Here's got hold of one of them. I hope he hasn't killed him by this time."

"What's that you say, Kent?" cried Mr. Stannard. "Where is the creature?" Then turning to the Sikh, he ordered him to get a light at once.

The lantern being brought, they went to where Hercules still stood guard, and found that he had taken captive one of the would-be robbers, and held him pinned to the ground as helpless as a mouse in the paws of a cat. Fortunately the man was heavily muffled about the throat, or he certainly would have been killed. As it was his face was torn somewhat, and he had in his arms and legs such proof of the tremendous power of the mastiff's jaws as he would be a long time in forgetting.

It was not an easy job to persuade Hercules to release his prisoner, but finally he was coaxed off, and then Mr. Stannard saw that the Tartar's wounds had attention before questioning him as to the meaning of the night-attack.

The Tartar was at first very reluctant to speak,

but after Bunty, at Mr. Stannard's direction, stood over him with his terrible knife held in one hand, while he felt its edge meaningly with the other, the fellow's tongue became unloosed, and he told the whole story.

It seemed that a large band of Tartars had been watching Mr. Stannard's party from the time they crossed the border, with the idea of making a night-attack, and of not only scaring them back into Indian territory, but also of looting the camp if they had the chance.

Under cover of the midnight darkness, and trusting to the noise of the torrent to render their approach inaudible, they had surrounded the tents in spite of the Sikh's vigilance, and were just about to make a combined rush that would infallibly have effected their object, when the big mastiff, without giving a note of warning, had sprung upon one of them and borne him to the ground.

The cry thus forced from the captive then gave the alarm, and led to the failure of the plan. To Hercules, therefore, belonged the whole credit of having saved the camp. Great was Kent's joy and pride on this being established.

"You good old dog!" he exclaimed, hugging the mastiff's huge head to his own breast, a bit of demonstration that the big fellow seemed not quite to understand. "You just saved us all, didn't you?

And when we get to Kashmir you shall have the finest silver collar that can be made for you; won't he, father?"

"He will indeed, Kent," responded Mr. Stannard heartily, venturing, in the enthusiasm of his gratitude, to give the dog a warm pat on the head, to which the strange creature returned a deep grunt as of distant thunder. "Bless my heart!" cried Mr. Stannard, "he won't even let me pat him. Well, so long as he takes such good care of us at night I'll put up with his little eccentricities, but I confess I'd much prefer if he'd get more sociable."

As early as possible the following morning the travellers set off again, the Tartar, who had been pretty well punished by Hercules, being released, with a warning to behave better in future, and a message for his people to the effect that any interference with or attacks upon British visitors to their country would bring upon them the wrath of the British Empire, and be a bad thing for them in every way; all of which he promised earnestly to remember.

Having turned their backs upon Thibet for good, the travellers made their way into the province of Spiti, and at the end of the day camped at Lari, under a solitary apricot-tree, which, they were informed, was the only one of its kind in the whole province. Certainly what they could see of Spiti from their camp fully bore out the statement. Not a house

nor a tree, and hardly even a bush, broke the stern monotony of the landscape.

"I don't see how people can live in such a country," Kent broke out, after a survey of the scene. "I'm sure I should go crazy if I had to stay six months in it."

"If you didn't quite do that you'd find it extremely depressing, that's certain," said Mr. Stannard. "One needs to be born, bred, and brought up in such a place as this to live in it with any contentment."

"It's a precious poor living that's to be got out of it, too, it seems to me," returned Kent. "Why, I should think even the goats would have a hard time of it finding enough to eat."

"Yet the people do manage to get along somehow, poor creatures," said Mr. Stannard in a tone of sympathy. "You ought to be thankful, Kent, that your lot did not lie among them."

"I am indeed thankful, father," responded Kent.
"I often think how lucky I've been to see so much of the beautiful part of the world as I have done, and to be free to spend my life where the scenery is fine and the people are pleasant."

But if the way to Lari was dreary, how much more so was that to Dunkar, which led through a series of cañons and chasms that were simply appalling! Kent was being constantly reminded of the

Valley of the Shadow of Death as they toiled slowly and painfully onward.

Their road, if such it could with any accuracy be called, ran along a dry water-course, cut through soft stratified deposits whose walls rose straight up to hundreds, and in some places to thousands, of feet in height. Though the water-course twisted and curved in every direction, its sides were as straight as if they had been cut with a knife; while high up on the edges of this extraordinary ravine the action of the elements had worn away the strata, so as to form spires, and towers, and all sorts of fantastic shapes, some of which seemed ready to fall into the chasm at any moment.

Again and again did Kent give apprehensive glances at these tottering towers, and exclaim, "Look, father! just look at that one! Wouldn't you think it was coming right down on us?"

The coolies showed great reluctance at passing through this gorge. Indeed, at one place they came to a full stop, and as they were bringing up the rear, Mr. Stannard did not know it until Bunty came running after him looking very indignant, and reported what they were about.

Mr. Stannard knew it was not a time for argument or entreaty. Although he with his son and servants made only a quartette, while of the coolies there were three times that number, there

was but one course to pursue. Taking his revolver in hand, and bidding Kent do the same, while the Sikh and Ghoorka were ordered to draw, the one his own sword, and the other his knife, Mr. Stannard hastened back to where the coolies had come to a halt.

They visibly cowered at his presence, and looked quite scared though sullen; but, saying not a word to them, he strode through their ranks until he was behind them all, Kent, Champ, and Bunty being beside him.

Then, with levelled revolvers and uplifted weapons, the four marched in line upon the coolies, Mr. Stannard calling out in his most commanding tone, "Pick up your loads, and go on at once."

The terrified alacrity with which they obeyed was so ludicrous that Kent couldn't refrain from bursting out into a laugh, whose infection communicated itself to both Champ and Bunty, although the gravity of Mr. Stannard's countenance in no wise relaxed.

Like one man the coolies snatched up their packs, threw them upon their shoulders, and almost tumbled over one another in their frantic eagerness to get as far as possible from Mr. Stannard's revolver.

When they had all got started, and their backs were turned, Mr. Stannard gave way to a smile of satisfaction.

"That's not always the best way to deal with them, Kent," said he, "but it suited the present occasion best. They won't get over their scare before we reach Dunkar, and there I'll discharge the whole batch, and engage a fresh lot."

They reached Dunkar before sundown, and found it as remarkable in its way as the path by which they had approached it. The town was perched a thousand feet above the Lee river, on the ledges and towers of an immense ridge of soft strata, which broke off with a sudden fall, after affording ground for the fort, houses, and Lama temples of Dunkar.

The result was so extraordinary, not to say picturesque, that it was the most natural thing in the world for Kent, when he came in sight of it, to exclaim—

"What a queer place for a town! What ever possessed people to build up there? Have the inhabitants wings, or do they use flying-machines?"

"I don't imagine they have either, Kent," answered Mr. Stannard. "Their reason for choosing so strange a site for their town was probably twofold. They wanted to be quite safe from attack, and it was the only tolerably level spot they could find in the whole neighbourhood."

"I should think they'd need to keep a sharp

watch on their children when they begin running about on their own account," said Kent, "for if any of them were to fall over the precipice it would be the end of them, surely."

"I am afraid the parents wouldn't take that very much to heart, Kent," responded Mr. Stannard gravely. "They're none too fond of their little ones in this part of the country."

But if Dunkar was strikingly picturesque in its situation, it had nothing else to recommend it, being so dirty and miserable in every way that Mr. Stannard camped at some distance, for fear of carrying away too many of its smallest and most active inhabitants.

He had no difficulty in securing a fresh lot of coolies, the mukea, or functionary whose duty it was to look after travellers, being very polite, and anxious to please; and the next morning the journey was resumed at an improved rate of speed.

Before leaving Dunkar, Mr. Stannard purchased two of the Spiti ghunts, a species of small horse famous for their unfailing sure-footedness, their sagacity, and their ability to carry their riders safely up and down the most dangerous and fatiguing paths.

Kent was greatly pleased at this new acquisition. His father gave him his choice of them, and he selected the smaller of the two, a shaggy little mare with flowing tail and mane, from either side of whose heavy forelock there gleamed as bright and kindly an eye as ever a pony possessed. He called her by the first syllable of the land of her birth, and now that he had Spy and Hercules to take care of him between them, he felt very well looked after indeed.

One day's riding was sufficient to prove Spy a perfect treasure. No matter how rough the path, she could pick her way steadily along it, and the cleverness with which she would keep her footing through a wild confusion of boulders was a wonder to witness.

The travellers now had before them difficulties of the most formidable kind. At Dunkar, which was the capital of Spiti Province, they were some thirteen thousand feet above sea-level, and they had passed through some woefully desolate and dreary country to reach it; yet they were soon to climb to still loftier altitudes, and to traverse still wilder and lonelier stretches of country.

Between Dunkar and Loisar there were several very shaky sangpas to be crossed, which would have brought any ordinary horse to a full stop. Then the one at Kazeh had for its central span three logs laid side by side, without railing of any kind, and overlaid with loose branches that made the footing very treacherous. Yet the Spiti ponies

went over it without a slip, and seemed rather to like the job, the roaring of the river far below having no effect whatever on their nerves.

At Loisar, which is one of the highest villages in the world, being nearly fourteen thousand feet above the level of the sea, the nights were so cold that Mr. Stannard was glad to exchange his tent for a small house provided by the Indian Government for the benefit of travellers.

Though built of mud, it was dry and clean, and in view of the rain which fell during the night, proved a particularly welcome refuge.

But Hercules would have none of it, in spite of Kent's coaxings. He insisted upon staying outside the door, and as this exposed him to attacks from the dogs of the village, he had to defend himself all night long, so that the noise of his growling and barking proved the reverse of soporific. Indeed, the situation became so acute more than once, that Kent was fain to get up and endeavour to secure silence, though without any permanent result.

Beyond Loisar lay a wild stretch of country where there were no villages, no houses, and no wood, so that it was necessary for the party to take supplies of every kind along with them. This meant an increase of their force of coolies, and, owing to the impossibility of getting as many men as were required, Mr. Stannard had to employ

half-a-dozen women, who were only too glad to have the opportunity of earning a little money.

Mr. Stannard also took along with him a small flock of milch goats and a couple of sheep, the latter to be turned into mutton en route. So that, what with coolies, ponies, goats, sheep, and the mastiff, quite an imposing caravan was made up.

Kent, riding at the head of it by his father's side, felt like the aide-de-camp to the commander of an army expedition, and tried to put on the airs of a cavalry-man; to which, however, the irregular pace of his pony was ill adapted, and he soon tired of the amusement.

Up the difficult Kansum pass they toiled, crossing the summit at a height of fifteen thousand feet, and then descended into the Shigri valley, so appropriately called the "Valley of Glaciers." As far as the eye could reach nothing but banks of snow and ice were to be seen, and the great ice-serpents crept over into the valley from every direction.

"Bare is it, without house or track, and destitute of obvious shelter as a shipless sea," said Mr. Stannard, after gazing about him. "I hope we'll not have to be long in this dreadful valley."

"I hope not, indeed, father," responded Kent, with a significant shiver. "It's the worst place we've got into yet."

Had they known as they spoke the kind of

reception the monsoon was already preparing for them among the mountain-tops, and what sufferings they were to endure ere they left the Shigri valley behind, they might have expressed themselves in still stronger terms.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE VALLEY OF GLACIERS

During the afternoon the heavens had been wearing threatening looks, which finally, towards sunset, fulfilled their menace by a storm of wind and rain and snow, that broke fiercely upon the travellers. The thermometer sank thirty degrees in as many minutes, and there was scarcely time to put up the tents ere the full fury of the elements revealed itself.

From the interior of a comfortable house the sight would have been very grand indeed, as the storm-clouds rolled in great masses down from the snowy peaks, enveloping mountain and valley in their fleecy folds. But with only the thin walls of a tent for protection, the sublimity of the scene offered poor compensation for the misery involved, and Kent found it very hard to keep from grumbling.

Yet how much better off was he than the poor coolies, who, without any shelter whatever from the inclemency of the weather, had to manage as

best they could, crouching close together about a big fire and saying not a word, whatever they felt! The sight of them sealed Kent's lips, and he made no complaints, enduring cheerfully the discomforts of the situation.

Mr. Stannard's face had an usually grave look that evening. He had hoped to get through the dreaded Shigri valley without having to face a snow-storm, it being very early in the season for snow. But now that one had come, there was no telling how many more might follow in its train, and a succession of such storms might mean his having to retrace his way, if nothing worse.

"I confess I don't like the look of things at all, Kent," said he as they sat together over the dinner, which, in spite of all difficulties, the Sikh and Goorkha had managed between them to prepare. "I shall not breathe freely until we are clear of this miserable place."

"There's no fear of our being snowed up here, is there, father?" asked Kent, with some apprehension in his tone.

"Oh, it is not likely to turn out so bad as that," replied Mr. Stannard. "But you know every day counts if we would reach Kashmir before winter, which sets in so early in these mountains, and that's what is bothering me most."

"And will you go ahead to-morrow morning

even if it is still snowing?" inquired Kent hoping that the reply would be in the negative, for he shrank from the idea of facing such a storm.

"Certainly," responded Mr. Stannard resolutely.

"We must push ahead as best we can. There's nothing to be gained by staying here."

The snow continued to fall heavily all night, and by morning it was nearly a foot deep. The coolies were very reluctant to advance. They besought Mr. Stannard to turn back, assuring him that they knew another pass over the mountains that was quite free from snow.

But Mr. Stannard was one of those men who, having put their hand to the plough, are not to be easily turned back; and, moreover, he had good reason to believe that the inducement of a better route was not founded upon fact. So the orders were given to go ahead, and the coolies had no alternative but to obey.

The tramping through the snow was toilsome work, and Kent's heart was full of pity for the female carriers, although he could do nothing to help them.

Soon after midday they came to a place where a glacier reached right down to the river, and it was necessary to cross its foot, for there was no flanking it.

Then did Kent have striking proof of the won-

derful powers of the Spiti pony he rode. The glacier was thickly covered with slabs of slate, intermingled with boulders of granite and gneiss, while here and there yawned gaping crevasses opening into unknown depths. The way the clever little mare carried her young rider across the glacier was almost too wonderful to be believed without being witnessed. Up and down the ridge of ice, and over the great rough blocks of granite and the treacherous slabs of slate, she went without a step or stumble. She would spring from one boulder to another like an ibex, in spite of the burden she bore, and she faltered not at fathomless crevasses, although there was nothing better than a slippery slope to spring from, and a sharply slanting block of stone to land upon.

Once it seemed as if her marvellous skill had failed her, for in descending some high steps in the rock her feet slipped, and it seemed as if she must go over the precipice; so that Mr. Stannard, who saw it all, cried aloud for fear, and Kent for the moment shut his eyes in sheer terror.

Yet were not Spy's resources at an end. Dropping upon her knees for an instant, she thereby checked her fall, and then, with an indescribable sort of side-spring, recovered her footing again, and went on as if nothing had happened.

Again and again was Kent moved to exclaim in admiration and pride of his pony's achievements—

"Hurrah for you, Spy! You're game for anything. There's not a steeplechaser in England could match you at this."

They halted at midday for lunch, and having carefully selected a place where they were sheltered from the wind, were just in the middle of their meal, when the ice beneath the stones on which they were seated gave a startling crack, and the stones themselves began to sink so rapidly that there was a ludicrously hasty scramble for solid ground.

"Why, what's the meaning of this?" cried Mr. Stannard, when he had seen to it that not only the different members of his party, but the lunchthings also, were out of danger. "Have we been resting near the mouth of a crevasse?"

A careful examination showed that this was precisely what they had done. Their resting-place was right between the lips of a crevasse which had become blocked up with stones, and it was a miracle that they had escaped without injury.

Soon after they set out again the snow, which had held off since the previous night, returned in full force, and they had to face a blinding storm that opposed every step of their progress. The storm would have been bad enough in itself had the going been in any wise tolerable, but it was, if possible, worse than ever. The road was literally frightful, leading as it did over great boulders, with scarcely a pretence of a track. Here it followed the bed of the Chandra river, and there it climbed its steep stony banks, while again it wound along the edge of precipices on paths fit only for wild goats.

And finally, to make matters worse, there were a number of glacier-fed streams to be forded, whose icy waters brought plaintive cries from the women that made Mr. Stannard repent having been persuaded into engaging them as carriers.

For several hours the travellers floundered and fought their way through the storm, and then, late in the afternoon, they were brought to a halt by the native who was acting as guide making the startling announcement that he had lost his way, and would not go any farther that day. Mr. Stannard reasoned with him and threatened him to no avail; not even a revolver held at his head had any effect. He was tired out and utterly despondent owing to the numbing influence of the cold, and seemed quite prepared to die rather than proceed.

In this emergency the only thing to be done was to look round for some sheltered place where they might camp for the night. After some searching about, a kind of cave under an overarching precipice was discovered, and here, in default of anything better, they went into camp. The tents could not be put up for lack of a sufficiently level space, and Mr. Stannard and Kent therefore had to share in the sufferings of the others, which were by no means to be made light of.

That long night of misery was one never to be forgotten. Without pause or rest the storm raged and roared, sending the snow in flying wreaths into the farthest corner of the cave, and making it difficult to maintain the fire which Bunty had, with infinite pains, succeeded in lighting.

Kent found his big mastiff a better friend than even his own father that night; for, while Mr. Stannard had all he could do to keep his own blood in circulation, Hercules not only kept himself warm, but by allowing his young master to curl up close to his great furry body, afforded him a protection from the cold that greatly mitigated his misery.

"You dear old chap!" he murmured, as he nestled against the mastiff's side. "How glad I am I've got you! You're the best dog that ever breathed."

The longest night, however, must come to an end, and this dreadful one did finally drag itself

away without any actual catastrophe, although several of the coolies got painful frost-bites, and even Mr. Stannard had to confess that another such experience would certainly cause him to give up his plan and return to India.

But happily the Shigri valley had done its worst. The following day was bright and clear, and although the fallen snow made the walking heavy and toilsome, by midday the travellers had left the valley behind, and got into an entirely different region, where there was grass in abundance, and clumps of willow-trees, the sight of which was exceedingly refreshing after the desolation of the "Valley of Glaciers."

Late in the afternoon Kent came near losing his life while going down some natural steps that skirted the edge of a tremendous precipice.

He was riding Spy, because he had come to put more faith in the little mare's sure-footedness than in his own, and had got along very well, in spite of the extreme difficulty of the descent, until the last step was reached.

Here, just at the most critical moment, when Spy had planted both her fore-feet upon the ledge, and Kent was leaning back as far as he could, holding her in with all his might, the crupper gave way, and the saddle slid forward on to the pony's neck, thus upsetting the animal's balance.

Well was it then for both rider and horse that the former was no less quick of wit than strong of arm.

There was only one possible thing to be done to save both from destruction, and that one thing Kent saw and did. Throwing himself off the saddle on to the ledge, he drew the little mare down after him by tightly grasping her mane, and the intelligent creature, seeming to clearly realise, kept perfectly still until Champ came up and rescued both from their perilous situation.

Although sorely bruised by the fall, Kent was greatly elated at having by his prompt action saved not only his own life, but his beloved Spy's also.

Mr. Stannard, who was some little way ahead, knew nothing of the occurrence until it was all over, but when he heard about it he praised Kent warmly.

"Your quickness of decision and action is a very valuable quality, my boy," said he, regarding him fondly. "In this case it meant the difference between picking up a mangled corpse from the bottom of the ravine and having you before me none the worse save for a few bruises. I think there must be some fine future in store for you, Kent; you get out of your scrapes and perils so triumphantly."

"I'm sure I don't know anything about the fine future, father," responded Kent. "But I know this, that I'm not at all anxious to lose my life up

here in the Himalayas, and that I'm going to take the best care of myself that I can."

After leaving the Shigri valley the travellers had some tremendous climbing to do in their journey over the Shinkal pass, the crest of which was an enormous glacier. In this glacier were innumerable narrow crevasses, many of them concealed by white honeycombed ice, and the greatest care had to be exercised in going ahead.

Here the Goorkha proved himself simply invaluable. He seemed to be able to divine the proximity of a crevasse by some instinct not possessed by any of the others, and over and over again saved the party from accident by his timely warnings. He evidently took great pride in his sagacity, hailing the location of each crevasse with as much lively satisfaction as if it were a decided advantage instead of a drawback, necessitating, as it usually did, a more or less lengthy detour.

The summit of the pass was not less than eighteen thousand feet high, and the effect upon the climbers of this great altitude, and the rarity of the atmosphere, was to set many of them bleeding at the nose, and to render exertion very difficult.

Kent was quite sure he never could have got across but for Spy, upon whose energy neither the difficult going nor the rarity of the air seemed to have any effect. As it was, his nose bled profusely, and he found it so hard to breathe that he vowed he would suffocate if they did not soon get down to lower ground.

Near the summit of the pass lay a great glacial lake, which they had to cross, and they halted for their midday rest at its centre.

"Here now, Kent," said Mr. Stannard, "is the home of eternal winter—the region of perpetual snow. How would you like to spend your life here?"

Kent looked about him, and gave a shudder, so expressive as to render words superfluous. Certainly human imagination could scarcely conceive a scene more savagely dreary and desolate, withal so grandly beautiful.

From all sides of the glacial lake rose the snow-slopes, a thousand feet or more in height, and dazzling white in their unsullied purity; while above them towered vast overhanging walls of stratified ice, from which every few moments huge masses would detach themselves, and come plunging down the slopes with the rattle and roar of an avalanche. There was absolutely nothing to relieve the stern sublimity of Nature, entrenched in her citadel of unchanging cold.

It began to snow before the travellers got off the glacier, and when they had descended a few hundred feet it was snowing so heavily on the ice-lake that, had they still been there, they could not have seen more than two yards before their faces, and consequently would have been in incessant danger of falling into one of the innumerable crevasses.

Happily, however, that danger was now past, and they could make good speed with easy minds.

The following day found them well within the borders of the mysterious province of Zanskar, whither few Europeans had ever preceded them.

"I am not at all sure as to the kind of reception we shall get in this region, Kent," said Mr. Stannard. "There is very little known about the people or country and from what I have been able to learn, they're not at all anxious to become better known, so that I won't be surprised if we find them inclined to be inhospitable. But we won't stay any longer in their province than we can help, and perhaps they'll treat us decently enough."

Certainly, if the people were anything like as extraordinary as the land in which they lived, they were a queer lot.

The mountains of Zanskar presented everchanging views of the most weird and astonishing character. There were castles, spires, domes, and needles of solid rock, and mighty bastions that looked exactly as if they had been shaped by some gigantic hand.

Kent, reminded by them of the fairy tales of his childhood, exclaimed, with mingled wonder and delight, "Why, look, father, isn't that like a grand castle? I'm afraid Jack the Giant-Killer would have had a harder time of it if he'd had to attack such a stronghold as that; wouldn't he?"

Not only was the formation of these mountains marvellously varied, but their tints and colours were almost bewildering in their richness and variety. Green, purple, orange, brown, black, and yellow abounded, and there were other shades not so prominent, yet to be discerned by the careful eye.

Over all rose the intensely blue vault of heaven, from which the sunlight poured in dazzling splendour, working out wonderful effects in light and shadow with the aid of the surrounding mountainpeaks.

After passing down the valley for several hours, the first village of Zanskar came into sight. It was not a large place, yet the number of yaks and ponies pasturing in the fields adjoining seemed to betoken the presence of a good many people.

The approach of Mr. Stannard's party evidently created a sensation in the valley, and the inhabitants could be seen moving excitedly about

and gathering in little groups, which presently combined into one band, and came out to meet the strangers.

"Now," said Mr. Standard, his countenance indicating some concern, "we will soon know what the people of Zanskar are going to do with us."

"They don't look particularly friendly," said Kent, after an anxious scrutiny of the approaching throng. "What'll we do if they turn us back, as they did at Shipki?"

CHAPTER XII

WITH THE HIMALAYAN HIGHLANDERS

AT first glance the Zanskar folks looked so like a party of Highlanders that Mr. Stannard was led to exclaim, "Why, one would think we were in Scotland! Just see their tartans, Kent."

Not only the appearance of the men, who had tall, athletic forms, long faces, and aquiline noses, but the clothes they wore, certainly bore a striking resemblance to the clans of Auld Scotia.

If there were no kilts, there were plaids in abundance, and great variety of patterns; both men and women wearing them, and fastening them up with brooches, as did the Macgregors and Campbells of the other land.

The men, who kept well to the front, the women following behind evidently from pure curiosity, were stern and warlike of countenance, and armed with matchlocks and swords, which would render them formidable foes in the event of a fight.

"There'll be no frightening these fellows, Kent," said Mr. Stannard. "We'll have to make our way

by diplomatic means if we're going to get ahead at all."

When the two parties were about a hundred yards apart Mr. Stannard halted, and the Zanskar folks did the same.

By Mr. Stannard's instructions, one of the bigarries, or carriers, who claimed to be familiar with the dialect of the country, then went ahead to arrange for a conference. He was met half-way by the Talukdar, or principal man of the village, who, still wearing a stern look, began to question him as to who the Sahibs were, and what they were doing in Zanskar.

The bigarry, finding the questions pour in too fast upon him for his poor wits, appealed to Mr. Stannard, who then came forward, and using the carrier as an interpreter, explained the purpose of his coming and the composition of his party. He did this with the utmost courtesy, being anxious to make the best possible impression upon the Talukdar.

This official listened to him with grave attention, and then, signifying that he should not advance any farther, returned to his own people to report what he had heard, and to consult with them as to the reception of the strangers.

"I wish we could make out what they're saying, father," said Kent, as they watched the conference with eager eyes.

But the people were talking with such earnestness that it was impossible to guess from their manner how their decision might go, and of course even if their words had been audible they would not have been intelligible.

It must have been full fifteen minutes before the consultation ended, and then the Talukdar once more approached. This time coming right up to Mr. Stannard, he held out to him a rupee. At once the shadow of anxiety fled from Mr. Stannard's countenance, and bowing low, he said—

"I thank you with all my heart, Talukdar, and shall pay liberally for whatever I or my men may require of you."

Which, being translated by the bigarry, caused the hitherto grave face of the mountaineer to relax into a gracious smile, and returning the bow, he indicated by a wave of his hand that the way to the village was open.

As they moved forward in response to this invitation Kent asked his father what the giving of the rupee meant.

"Oh," replied Mr. Stannard, "that was huzur, an act of obeisance. By it he meant that everything in the village was at our command."

Kent laughed out loud in his relief and joy at this turn of affairs.

"Why," he cried, "they're only too glad to be

friends, and yet we were worrying ourselves as to how they would treat us."

The people of Kharjak proved thoroughly hospitable and kind. Not only was Mr. Stannard able to secure without difficulty all the carriers he needed for the next stage of his journey, but as many more insisted upon accompanying them, and helping to carry their burdens out of pure kindness, without any expectation of pay.

Although nearly fourteen thousand feet high, Kharjak was inhabited all the year round, and its inhabitants seemed to live in tolerable comfort, despite the scarcity of good soil in the neighbourhood.

Kent was much interested by the Choten and Mani, of which there were a great many round about Kharjah.

"What on earth can they want with such a lot of sacred buildings?" he exclaimed, half indignant at such a foolish waste of work and material. "One-quarter of them would surely be enough. There must be one apiece for every man, woman, and child in the place!"

The Choten were nearly solid edifices composed of large square platforms, placed one above another, and surrounded by the larger half of an inverted cone, which supported a tapering pillar bearing a sacred emblem. They were usually the receptacles for the relics of departed saints, and some had eyes

painted roughly upon them, thereby indicating that they were dedicated to Buddha, "the eye of the universe."

The Mani were quite different, being simply long dikes of stones, many of the stones being inscribed or sculptured. They varied in length from thirty to a thousand feet, and were usually about five feet in height and ten in breadth. The favourite inscription on these Mani was the Lama prayer, "Om mani pad me haun," which is so constantly in the mouths of the Thibetans.

"What do those words mean, father?" Kent asked. "They never seem to have put anything else on their walls."

"I can tell you what their literal translation is, Kent," replied Mr. Stannard. "It is simply, 'O God! the jewel in the Lotus, amen!' But what the people understand by it, and why they think saying it over and over again can do them any good, is more than I can tell you. You had better ask the first Lama you meet. He may be able to explain it all."

Fully determined to get to the bottom of the matter if possible, Kent, at the first opportunity, cross-questioned a Lama by the aid of one of the carriers. But when the Lama, in reply, poured forth a flood of words which completely paralysed the poor bigarry's powers of translation, Kent was

fain to confess defeat, and to leave the mystery of the Thibetan prayer unsolved.

Between Kharjak and Padam, the capital of the province of Zanskar, the travelling was comparatively easy, except for the crossing of two rivers, the Kharjak Chu and the Tsarap Lingti.

The first of these had to be forded, there being not even a jhula across it, and the stream was so broad and swift that a person going alone would infallibly have been swept away. The whole party therefore joined hands, and thus sustaining one another, got across in safety, although the Sikh came near creating a panic by losing his footing in mid-stream, and almost pulling down those next him in his violent efforts to regain it.

The passage of the second river proved still more exciting. Here there was nothing but a single rope suspended across the rapid torrent, like a strand from a spider's web.

When Kent saw it he exclaimed, with a puzzled laugh, "Who's going to walk that rope? Why, it isn't even tight! Or do you get across by going hand-over-hand?"

"Neither way, my boy," said Mr. Stannard.

"There are more ways of killing a cat than by amputating her tail behind her ears. Do you see that little rope running alongside the big one?

Well, take hold of that and pull."

Kent did as he was bid, and in response to his pulling there came over from the other side a sort of single trapeze, which ran freely along the big rope.

"Now," said his father, "get into that thing, hold on tight, and you'll be on the other side before you can say Jack Robinson."

With some little quaking of heart Kent obeyed, and as soon as he was settled on the wooden bar Mr Stannard let go, and the slope of the rope being pretty sharp, he flew across to the other bank with the swoop of a bird.

The experience was so exhilarating that Kent would have liked very well to repeat it, but the whole party had to be got over, and the horses across beside, and there was no time to spare, so he was fain to content himself with the hope that there were similar bridges ahead.

"I like it ever so much better than those horrid jhulas," he said emphatically. "They always make my heart beat as if it wanted to jump out of my body."

They reached Padam early in the afternoon, and found it the largest village they had seen since leaving inhospitable Shipki. Being the capital of the province, it was the residence of the Thanadar, who governed in the name of the Maharajah of Kashmir, and who had a small force of horse and foot soldiers to support his dignity

Mr. Stannard at once set out to call upon this official, taking Kent and the Sikh and Goorkha along with him. They were very civilly received, and Mr. Stannard given to understand that whatever he required would be furnished him.

Wishing to make some study of the place and its people, Mr. Stannard decided to remain for a few days, and so the camping-place was moved from the first location, which was not at all desirable, to a fine grassy terrace, where an immense rock afforded welcome protection from the almost ceaseless wind.

Kent was very glad of the stay. He was growing weary of the continuous travelling, and the prospect of three or four days' rest in one place was quite to his mind.

The morning after their arrival he mounted Spy, and, accompanied only by Hercules, set out to explore the town. There was not much to be seen. The houses were all of stone, and as alike as peas in a pot; low, square, solid buildings, with flat roofs and few windows, not at all attractive as dwellings. The streets were narrow and crooked, and there seemed to be no shops, although there must have been such establishments somewhere, even if Kent could not find them.

"I just wish I could light upon a candy-store," said he to himself, jingling some coins in his pocket.

"How I should enjoy a pound of good candy! It seems a perfect age since I tasted any," and he smacked his lips in regretful recollection of his last blow-out.

But there was manifestly no candy to be had for love or money, and giving up the town in disgust, he rode out into the outskirts, where he presently came upon a herd of horses tended by several boys of about his own age. The horses were of the small sturdy kind usually found in the mountains, and as he watched them grazing contentedly on the rank grass there came into his head a scheme which he proceeded to act upon without delay.

He was in quest of diversion. What could be more diverting than a good pony-race? His little Spy was far from being a slow-coach. Perhaps she might prove more than a match for the pick of the herd. At all events if she didn't there would be some fun in having a trial of speed.

But how was he to make himself understood to the boys in charge of the herd? They could not speak a word of English, and he was no less ignorant of Zanskarese.

How it was managed it would be hard to explain. When Kent first attempted to hold converse with the boys they seemed scared, and crowded together in a silent, constrained group. But when he, in nowise disconcerted by their shyness, continued to speak earnestly and to indicate by pantomime what he was driving at, the subtle freemasonry that prevails among boys the world over helped him out, and presently the brightest of the group began to nod his head as though to say, "Oh, I understand you now," and after a few words to his companions, went towards the band of ponies.

He caught one without difficulty, and springing upon his back, rode up alongside Kent with a smiling face.

Kent smiled cordially in return, and forgetting for the moment that they could not understand each other's speech, asked him, "Now, where shall we run to? You know the best course."

The boy shook his head to show that he did not comprehend, whereupon Kent once more had recourse to pantomime. By dint of many grimaces and much gesturing Kent at length succeeded in making his meaning clear, and then the boy pointed out a stunted willow-tree about a quarter of a mile away, and by an expressive swoop of his hand suggested that they should ride around that and back.

Kent having signified his consent to this, the boy had a brief but earnest conference with his companions, and then ranged up beside Kent, signifying that he was ready for the race.

He had no saddle, and a bit of rope was his only bridle, but he sat the pony as if he was a part of it, and Kent realised that his own better equipment would count for little.

The course was over a stone-strewed level that it would have been sheer madness to send any ordinary horse across at full speed. But neither Kent nor the young Zanskarite had any fears for their mounts. They had no less entire confidence in them than in themselves, and they looked as composedly at the rough and dangerous stretch of ground as if it had been a smoothly turfed racecourse.

The start was by mutual consent. The riders just gave one glance at each other by way of a signal, and then off they pelted, the four pairs of hoofs rattling over the stones like so many castanets. Little Spy entered into the spirit of the contest with all her heart; so much so, indeed, that if Kent had let her have her own way she would have extended herself to the utmost from the very start.

But he knew better than to allow her to do this. Though the course was little more than half-a-mile in length, it was too rough to be galloped over at top speed. He therefore put a strong pull on Spy, and kept her back while the other pony shot past, its rider seeming to have no other thought than to get as far ahead as possible.

"Easy now, Spy—easy, my girl," said Kent soothingly. "He's going too hard to hold out. We'll catch him time enough."

The Zanskarite, by dint of urging his pony to the utmost, had got a lead of full twenty yards before they reached the tree. But a good half of this he lost in making the turn, Kent's bridle giving him so much better control over his steed, and when they straightened out for home not more than ten yards separated them.

Kent now gave his pony the reins and clapped his heels to her sides, shouting cheerily, "Away with you, Spy! Catch up to him, quick!" Half-way to the finish the boys were side by side, and Kent was already beginning to count the victory, when a most provoking thing happened.

Hercules had hitherto been bounding along beside Spy, barking lustily, but making no attempt to interfere. Just at this critical point in the race, however, it somehow got into his big head that his friend the pony needed encouragement, and the way he proceeded to impart it was by getting in front of her and springing at her head, meanwhile sending forth explosive barks that would have shaken the nerves of a mule.

In vain did Kent shout fiercely, "Down, Herc, down! Get out of the way, will you?" and aim fierce blows at him with his riding-whip.

The mastiff, instead of being checked by this, only jumped and barked the harder, and of course his foolish action could not fail to impede the progress of the pony, the result being that, greatly to Kent's chagrin, he was beaten by a couple of lengths.

The Zanskar boys were highly elated at the victory of their entry for this improvised race, but Kent was furious.

Had Hercules not interfered he would have won hands down, he felt confident, and nothing would satisfy him but another race.

To his great disgust, the Zanskarites refused. They were too well content with their first success to try again, and having tired himself out endeavouring to change their mind, Kent was fain to come away in a very bad humour.

As soon as he returned to the camp he told his father what had occurred, and how eager he was for a chance to redeem himself. Mr. Stannard, seeing that he really took the matter to heart, then promised to try what could be done, and went off at once to see the Thanadar.

The result of his conference with him was, that a race was arranged to take place the following morning between Kent's pony and the best that Padam could produce; whereat Kent was entirely satisfied, for he put implicit faith in Spy.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GREAT PADAM STEEPLECHASE

Kent was so worked up about the race that he could hardly get to sleep, and as he lay in bed wide awake and staring out through the door of the tent, an idea came to him that at once took possession of his mind.

"The very thing!" he murmured, giving himself a slap on the thigh in expression of his satisfaction. "Even if there be ponies here that can beat Spy racing on the level, I'm perfectly sure there's not one that can beat her at a steeplechase, and that is the kind of a race we'll have if I can manage it."

So soon as his father was awake in the morning Kent declared for a steeplechase, and vowed that nothing else would satisfy him.

Mr. Stannard at first demurred.

"Haven't you had enough escapes from breaking your neck," he asked, "that you are so eager to risk it riding a steeplechase over such country as this?"

But Kent pleaded earnestly, and finally prevailed

so far as to secure his father's pledge that if the other side had no objection he would give way.

When the thing was proposed to the Thanadar he agreed at once. There would be far more excitement about such a race, and as it involved the possibility of somebody's neck or limb being broken, it quite approved itself to his half-savage mind.

Long before the time appointed for the contest the people of Padam were thronging out to the level where it was to take place.

Mr. Stannard and the Thanadar had arranged the details between them, to the entire satisfaction of both. The course selected was along the bottom of the valley, its length being altogether more than a mile, and its character such as to give even an Irish steeplechaser pause. There were stone walls to be leaped over, irrigating brooks to be crossed, big boulders to be surmounted, and, above all things, various Choten and Mani to be scrupulously avoided, for it would have been sacrilege to race across them.

The starting-point was at the upper end of the valley, and the racers were to go to the lower end and back, thus making up the two miles.

Sharp on time everything was in readiness, Kent having taken the precaution to fasten Hercules securely at the camp, so that he would not again interfere in so untimely and provoking a fashion. The big fellow roared and tugged furiously at his chain, but he could not break his bonds, and had perforce to submit to his temporary captivity.

By way of preparation for the event, the Sikh and Goorkha had combed and brushed up little Spy until she presented quite a jaunty appearance, her mane and tail being plaited in true racing fashion.

The Padam pony had also received an amount of attention that must have caused it some astonishment, and this time was bridled and saddled in proper style. The rider was the same boy that had been Kent's opponent before, the Thanadar evidently considering that that would be fair for both parties.

Every nerve in Kent's frame was a-quiver with excitement, and his heart beat like the ticks of a watch. Noting this, Mr Stannard said warningly—

"Don't lose your head, Kent, my boy. It's going to be a hard race, and you'll need all your wits to win it. Keep your pony well in hand, and don't attempt to make the running. The other chap will do that for you."

Kent nodded his head vigorously in token of heeding his father's advice, but said nothing in reply. He was too excited to trust himself to speak.

There was almost perfect silence in the throng of spectators as the ponies got into position for the start. The Thanadar had courteously insisted upon Mr. Stannard giving the signal, which was to be the dropping of a handkerchief.

The nervousness of the riders had communicated itself to their mounts, and there were a couple of false starts before they got away well together, amid the cheers and cries of the men, women, and children gathered for the contest.

As Mr. Stannard anticipated, the Padam boy sent his pony off at full speed, just as though the race were a half-mile dash instead of a long pull over the very roughest of courses. This caused the Thanadar to look grave, and to mutter something under his moustache that at least was not a blessing, while Mr. Stannard looked at Champ and Bunty with a meaning smile.

In the first quarter of a mile the Padam boy got a long lead, for although the temptation to keep close to him was very great, Kent managed to restrain the ardour of both himself and his pony.

"We mustn't go too fast at first, my good little Spy," he said to the excited little mare. "There's lots of work to be done yet."

The racers now came to the first jump, a low, broad stone wall, well worth the attention of a veteran cross-country rider. The Padam pony,

baulked for an instant, sprang on the top of the wall and down on the other side; but Spy took it in her stride with a leap that was beautiful to witness.

"Hurrah, my girl!" shouted Kent gleefully, seeing at once how his opponent's speed over the flat was to be matched by Spy's superiority in jumping. "We've got them all right, see if we haven't."

The next jump to be negotiated was an irrigating brook whose stony sides gave a poor take-off, but the Padam pony flew over it unhesitatingly, a long jump evidently coming easier to it than a high one.

Spy did equally well, and on the two went, the distance between them remaining practically unchanged.

Another stone wall and another brook were passed in much the same way, Spy gaining slightly because of the Padam pony's manner of surmounting the wall; and then came the field of boulders, a bit of riding that might have daunted the pluckiest riders to hounds in England or pig-chasers in India.

"Take care now, Spy," said Kent, pulling hard on the reins. "Mind where you put your little feet."

In the case of any ordinary horse the warning would certainly have been most timely, but for Spy it seemed to be quite superfluous. She did it with

skill little short of miraculous. Her instinct was as quick as lightning, and, without hesitating for a moment, she chose just the right thing to do.

Now she would spring to the top of a boulder, and drop lightly on the other side. Then she would dodge around another, never failing to take the shortest cut. Again, she would shy off to the right or left, thus securing the only bit of smooth footing within reach.

Meantime the Padam pony was floundering along in an undecided, worried way, that caused it to lose ground steadily, so that by the time the boulders were passed half its lead had been lost, and Kent began to grow jubilant.

At the turn Kent was not more than twenty yards behind, and now he ventured upon a little strategy that at first caused his father some bewilderment and concern, so that he exclaimed to Champ and Bunty—

"Why, what is Kent about? Surely Spy has not bolted and he can't keep her in the course?"

From their point of view it certainly looked as if something of the kind might have happened, for Kent, instead of following at the other's heels, was making a wide divergence, the reason of which did not appear at all clear.

But Kent knew just what he was doing. His keen eye had noticed off to one side a kind of path

through the boulders that offered an easier way, and at the risk of losing a little ground he determined to take it, because it would be such a saving to his pony's strength.

It proved more of a swerve from the straight course than he expected, and while he took it the Padam boy regained all the lead he had lost.

But when they were once more straightened out for home the wisdom of Kent's action became manifest, for the exertion of getting over and around the boulders had evidently told upon the other pony, and it was beginning to show signs of exhaustion. Still, it had some fight left in it, and Kent could not afford to crow.

The bit of smooth going that came after the boulders enabled it to recover a little, and it took the first brook quite gamely.

"Kent's got his work ahead of him yet," said Mr. Stannard, twitching his moustache nervously. "That Padam pony will take a lot of beating."

In spite of its plucky efforts, however, Spy was gaining upon it at every stride. Foot by foot the distance between the straining animals lessened, and Kent could see the Padam rider glancing over his shoulder at him with a look that was pathetic in its intense anxiety.

At the first stone wall the Padam pony stumbled and nearly fell; but its rider held it up with the skill of a professional jockey, and it went on again bravely.

Meanwhile Spy was on her part beginning to tire, and Kent, instead of holding her back, found it necessary to cheer her on.

The second stone wall tried both ponies hard, and the succeeding brook found them with little jump left in them. The Padam pony, indeed, made no effort to clear the brook at all, being content to scramble down one steep bank and up the other.

But Kent would not let Spy do it in that way. Checking her for a moment that she might catch breath and have a good look at the water-course, he then sent her at it with a whoop of encouragement. Responding gamely to the demand upon her, Spy gathered herself together and made a noble effort to clear the brook. But her previous exertion had taken too much of her strength, and only her forefeet cleared the brink of the bank, her hind-feet striking the slope.

Had Kent's knowledge of riding been limited to trotting comfortably along smooth country roads or galloping over breezy downs, that would have been an end of the race so far as he was concerned. As it was, he came so near being thrown, that his father shouted in mingled alarm and dismay, and Champ and Bunty both made a start towards him.

But his unsteadiness was only for a moment.

In another instant he had both himself and Spy well in hand, and with a lift of the knees and tug of the reins, got her up the bank and away again.

He was now not more than a furlong from the goal, and the Padam boy was about ten yards ahead. But his pony was manifestly hanging out signals of distress, and if Spy could only put on a little bit of a spurt the victory would be in his hands.

Summoning all his strength of mind and body for the supreme effort, Kent strove to inspire his flagging pony with energy for a final effort. He did not go to the whip, for the simple reason that he had none in his hands. It was repugnant to his nature to lay the whip upon an animal already doing its utmost.

But by word and hand and knee he cheered on his doughty little mount, and so gallantly did she respond, that he could see he was gaining at every stride. Ere one-half the furlong had been covered Spy's nose was beside the Padam pony's flank. Foot by foot she continued to gain, despite the desperate and cruel blows rained by its rider upon her opponent.

Now the two bays were side by side, the Padam lad lashing furiously at his pony's flanks, while Kent, a rein in each hand, bent forward and spoke kindly to his straining steed.

Absolute silence held the crowd of spectators, so

intense was the excitement; and had Kent glanced up he would have seen his father's face set with anxiety, showing white among the dark-skinned throng that surrounded him. But Kent saw nothing save his pony's head, and heard nothing save the faithful creature's laboured breathing.

The Padam pony, stung by the repeated blows of the whip into a desperate effort, held Spy for full twenty yards, and a sharp sense of fear of defeat sent a shudder through Kent. But the next moment, and with the goal still fifty yards away, down went the exhausted animal, pitching its rider clean over its head, where he lay stunned by the shock, while Kent galloped home an undisputed winner, amid a chorus of glad hurrahs from his own party, in which even some of the Padam folks did not refuse to join.

As soon as he had passed the winning-post Kent turned Spy around, and, without waiting for his father's congratulation, rode back to where his rival was being assisted to his feet. Happily he had received no serious injury, nor was his pony hurt in any way beyond being utterly used up for the time, so that there was nothing to mar Kent's satisfaction in a victory that certainly reflected no small credit upon both Spy and himself.

The Thanadar was not at all content with the result, and tried hard to induce Mr. Stannard to

have another race arranged. But, although Kent was nothing loath, Mr. Stannard would not consent. Spy had gloriously proved her superiority, and there was nothing to be gained by risking her legs and her young owner's neck in another race.

Moreover, he was impatient to proceed, and did not wish to remain at Padam longer than daybreak of the following day.

"We must hurry on to Kashmir before the snowstorms begin to come in force and render the passes impracticable, Kent," he explained. "We've got a good deal of hard climbing ahead of us still, and the less snow we have to reckon with the better."

Small notion had Mr. Stannard as he spoke then, that for a much weightier reason than the running of another race he would be compelled to prolong his stay at Padam far beyond his plans, and that the effort to reach Kashmir before the snows would entail more hardship and difficulty than he for the moment imagined.

That night the Thanadar gave a feast in honour of his visitors, and although feeling somewhat out of sorts, Mr. Stannard, accompanied by Kent, took part in the festivities, and did his best to show appreciation of the entertainment provided. But as the night waxed late Mr. Stannard's indisposition increased, until at length he had to beg

his host to allow him to withdraw to his own tent, as he could hardly keep upon his feet.

Kent's face, which had been full of smiles at the absurd performances of some native jugglers, who were better as clowns than as sleight-of-hand performers, grew suddenly grave when he saw how ill his father seemed, and as soon as they had left the Thanadar he began to question him anxiously.

"Do you know what's the matter with you, father? I hope you're not going to be ill, as I was when the missionary's wife was so good to me. There's nobody here to look after you."

"Except you, Kent," replied Mr. Stannard, with a warm smile of pride and affection. "You wouldn't mind being my nurse for a while, would you?"

"Why, no, father, of course not," responded Kent eagerly, grasping his father's hand. "But I hope you're not going to need a nurse all the same."

"I hope not too, my boy, from the bottom of my heart," echoed Mr. Stannard. "But you needn't be frightened. It's nothing serious, I imagine. Just a touch of indigestion, or something equally trifling."

Now, although Mr. Stannard thus affected to treat the matter lightly, as a matter of fact his mind was troubled with grave apprehensions. He was for the most part a very healthy man, and had had little experience of illness, yet somehow his

present feelings told him that it was much more than a touch of indigestion, or even of gout, that was now troubling him.

"God grant it may not be dysentery!" he murmured, so low that Kent might not hear him. Yet that was precisely what he feared, and the dread weighed heavily upon his heart.

Kent was full of concern for his father, and proposed one thing after another, until at last Mr. Stannard, mustering a cheery smile, ordered him off to bed, saying—

"Make your mind easy, Kent dear. I'm not going to collapse to-night any way. We'll see how matters are in the morning. That will be time enough."

Despite his father's resolute cheeriness, Kent's mind was very uneasy, and he spent that night with one eye open, so to speak, and so lightly did he sleep that his father could hardly turn in bed without arousing him.

Mr. Stannard was very restless too. His sickness grew worse with every hour. His body became full of pain, and a burning fever possessed him, accompanied by such weakness that he realised that there was small chance of his being about on the morrow.

By the morning there was no further doubt as to the nature of Mr. Stannard's illness. He had been attacked by dysentery, and such a hold had that dangerous disease already taken of him that the utmost care would be required to ensure his recovery.

When Kent understood this a strange sense of dismay chilled his heart. It was certainly a trying position for a mere boy to have thus suddenly cast upon him such a weight of responsibility, for while his father continued ill he must assume charge of him and the whole party.

Was he equal to such a task?

CHAPTER XIV

SICKNESS AND PERIL

"Kent, my dear boy," said Mr. Stannard, doing his best to muster up a cheerful smile in spite of the suffering that racked him, "you'll have to take my place for a time. I've no idea how long I'll be laid up, but it's bound to be some days, and you must take charge of everything in the mean-time."

"I'll do my best, father," responded Kent, with a quivering of the lip and suffusion of the eyes that refused to be entirely suppressed; "and I'm sure I do hope it won't be long before you are all right again."

"It is fortunate we've got two such faithful fellows as Champ and Bunty for servants," continued Mr. Stannard. "They'll stand by us through thick and thin. But the carriers you might as well pay off at once. We can easily get as many as we want from the Thanadar when we are ready to start again."

The carriers were accordingly discharged, greatly

to their disappointment, for they had counted upon having a week's idleness at the Sahib's expense, and there was considerable muttering among them when they received their pay.

The Sikh and Goorkha manifested genuine concern for their master, and there could be no mistake about the sincerity with which they affirmed their readiness to be faithful to him and Kent, whatever might be the issue.

During the afternoon a change for the worse took place in the weather, and fearing the consequence of exposure in a thin canvas tent to such snowstorms as they had endured in the Shigri valley, Kent set about finding quarters for his father in one of the houses of Padam.

This proved to be no easy task. Whether the people were afraid of the sickness extending to them, or whether they had some superstitious antipathy to admitting the Sahib into their homes, it was impossible to make out. This much, however, was perfectly clear, that not even money had power over their objections, and that some other influence would be required to obtain for Kent what he sought.

Happily this influence was forthcoming. In despair of accomplishing his purpose unaided, Kent bethought himself of applying to the Thanadar, and the application was successful.

He at once took an interest in the matter, and assured Kent that a room would be obtained for him; and he was as good as his word. Before sundown a Sowar came to the tents with the welcome news that excellent accommodation had been arranged for at a house to which the Sowar would conduct the party, now reduced to four members.

Kent lost no time in making the move. The Thanadar had thoughtfully sent a litter for Mr. Stannard's use, and as soon as he was safely started with Kent at his side, the tents were struck, and, under Champ and Bunty's direction, carried with the rest of the baggage into the town, arriving at the house not long after the invalid.

The "excellent accommodation" promised by the Thanadar proved anything but that from an English point of view, though no doubt it was the best obtainable under the circumstances.

The house belonged to one of the principal Zemindars, or landed proprietors, and was a typical Thibetan residence of the better class, being built of stone without mortar, and strengthened by large beams that must have come from a long distance. It was a two-story house, the ground floor being practically a stable, tenanted by a happy family of cattle, sheep, and ponies, whose presence was continually manifested by the variety of smells and sounds that ascended from their quarters.

The upper flat was divided into a number of rooms, some of which were occupied by the women and children of the family, others as store-rooms, and one as a chapel, while the largest room of all was set apart for the men. It was here Mr. Stannard and his party were to put up, and when Kent first looked about him his thought was, "How can my father ever get well here?"

Although a spacious apartment, being nearly forty feet square, it had no window, the only source of light and air, save the door, being a large square hole in the roof, through which the rain, snow, and cold came freely, although the smoke from the struggling fire seemed reluctant to go out by it, and preferred hanging about the room, rendering the atmosphere dense and choking.

But the worst part of the room was its roof, which was composed of thorn-bushes pressed closely together, and although over four feet thick, it did not keep out the wet, the melting snow percolating through, and falling in frequent drops upon the floor. An unpleasant feature of this dropping water was its being so dirty, for the smoke had thickly coated the ceiling of the room with soot, and the drops were the colour of ink.

Before Kent had been many minutes in the room, he made up his mind that his father must be protected so far as possible from both the

smoke and the rain. But the question was how to manage it.

Mr. Stannard could suggest nothing, and begged Kent not to bother. "It won't make me any worse, even if it doesn't help me to get better," he said, with one of his brave smiles. "I'll dodge as many of the drops as I can, and say nothing about the rest."

But Kent could not rest content, and his busy brain worried over the matter, until finally he gave a shout of relief—" I've got it! The very thing! Come along, Bunty, and we'll fix it in a minute."

His idea certainly was a good one, and when put into execution seemed to meet the difficulty remarkably well. It was nothing more or less than to put up one of the tents inside the room, and have his father occupy it, just as if they were still out in the open air.

Mr. Stannard seemed much amused at the plan, but made no objection, and in a short time the tent was securely set up, and he was comfortably ensconced within it, to Kent's entire satisfaction.

"There now, father," said he exultingly, "you're as snug as a bug in a rug, and you'll not be bothered any more by having those horrid dirty drops come splashing down on you all the time."

"You certainly have made me far more comfortable, my dear boy," replied Mr. Stannard, "and

if I don't hurry up and get well, it won't be your fault."

Although he did put such a brave face on the matter, Mr. Stannard in reality was much troubled about himself. He had taken a good supply of medicine along with him, but he had given a great deal away to the sick and suffering he had encountered on the route, and he had not in stock the exact remedies he required, while, of course, there was nothing to be had in Padam that would be of any benefit.

The week that ensued was one full of anxiety on the part of Kent and the two faithful servants. The fell disease struggled hard with Mr. Stannard for his life, and there were days when the issue seemed so doubtful that Kent could hardly eat or sleep for keen concern. He spent as little time from his father's side as possible, going out only when it was necessary to look after supplies and so forth, and when Mr. Stannard ordered him off that he might fill his lungs with fresh air and keep the colour in his cheeks.

Champ and Bunty were beyond praise in their devotion and usefulness, the Sikh always taking Kent's place at Mr. Stannard's bedside when the former was out, and Bunty managing to concoct dainty dishes wherewith to tempt the sufferer's palate with a skill and resource that were simply

marvellous in view of the difficulties as to materials and means of cooking with which he had to contend.

During the long hours of nursing, Kent had one means of diversion in which he found great pleasure—to wit, the companionship of two children belonging to the family in whose house they were lodging. These youngsters, a boy and girl, the one five and the other six years old, spent most of their time in the other end of the room from that in which Mr. Stannard was lying.

Here they were tended, like the pair of frolic-some lambs they were, by their grandmother, a blear-eyed, bent-backed dame, with whom they were on the best of terms, although she did her utmost to keep them busy winding yarn and incessantly repeating the monotonous prayer, "Om mani pad me haun."

Although their parents were black-haired and swarthy-skinned, these children had as fair complexions and as light hair as if they were Danes, and, barring the dirt which usually obscured their faces, were bonny enough youngsters to rejoice the hearts of any ordinary parents. Kent had to win his way into their confidence, for at first they were very shy. But ere long a thoroughly friendly footing was established, and he found much enjoyment in their merry pranks. They seemed so

bright and clever that he was impelled to try and teach them some of his own language, and naturally enough, seeing that their chief business in life, next to winding endless lengths of yarn, seemed to be equally interminable repetition of the meaningless Lama prayer, he bethought him of having them learn the Lord's Prayer.

The old grandmother, evidently taking in that the lesson was a religious exercise of some sort, offered no objection, and Kent's winning ways, and unfailing rewards in the way of toothsome cakes prepared by the ingenious Bunty, were so effective that by the end of the week both children could repeat the Lord's Prayer without a mistake. It was really beautiful and touching to hear them go through it with their quaint pronunciation and sweet childish voices.

"Of course they don't understand a word of it," said Kent to his father after the first triumphant demonstration of his success as a teacher, "but they know that much English any way; and the next white people that come along, if they hear them saying the Lord's Prayer, it'll be sure to set them wondering how they came to learn it, and then perhaps they'll teach them something more themselves."

Young though they were, the children evidently understood that their new accomplishment was

something much to their credit, and they could be heard from time to time rehearing it to one another while winding away at the yarn.

Whenever the weather permitted Kent had a canter on Spy, Hercules bounding and barking along beside him; and this daily outing had much to do with keeping up his health and vigour during those days of anxiety and care. Mr. Stannard had been ill just a week, and was beginning to show signs of amendment, when Kent took a longer ride than usual, the day being unusually fine and the ground fairly free from snow. had gone away down to the lower end of the valley, leaving Padam some miles behind, and was about to retrace his steps, when Hercules started off in fierce pursuit of some small animal, whether a young bear or marmot Kent had not time to see. Away he went up a narrow gorge, and Kent, being unable to recall him by shouts of "Come back, Herc! Come back, sir!" had prepared to follow, lest his big pet should be lost to him.

The gorge grew narrower and darker as Kent proceeded, until at last he dared not go any farther. Happily, just when this conclusion forced itself upon him, Hercules decided that he had no chance of securing the object of his chase, and returned to his master, looking very crestfallen. Kent gave

him a good rating, and turned Spy around, intending to make all haste back to the town, when, to his surprise and consternation, he found his way barred by a quartette of as villainous-looking natives as he had seen since leaving Simla. They stood right in his path, and the leader of them, a tall, swarthy, sinewy fellow, armed with a long matchlock, was saying something in his own language, the purport of which Kent rightly took to be a summons to stand and deliver.

Now Kent was as quick to act as he was brave of heart, and taking in the situation at the first glance, he made response to the rascal's demand by clapping his heels to his pony's sides and charging straight at him. It was a daring thing to do, and in a less confined space might have had the success it deserved. But although Spy did bowl over the first fellow, knocking the matchlock from his grasp and nearly stunning him by his fall, the other three were too close to be avoided, and they instantly threw themselves upon Kent, one pulling him from his saddle, while two laid hold of the reins and threw Spy back on her haunches.

By this time Hercules had come up, and, needing no urging from Kent, took part in the struggle. He first sprang at the prostrate robber, but finding him practically hors de combat, turned his attention to the one that had hold of Kent.

Wasting no breath in a premonitory growl, he seized him by the thick of the thigh and gave him a crunching bite that caused him to roar in pain, and to let go of Kent at once.

"Good dog!" cried Kent, cheering him on. "Good old Herc! Give it to the rascals."

Quick to utilise the momentary dismay caused by the falling of one of the quartette, and the biting of the other, Kent now sought to regain possession of Spy. But in this he was foiled by the two uninjured men, and although Hercules did his best to get his teeth into them, they managed to keep him off without letting go of either the pony or Kent.

Matters were at this pass, and Kent was pretty clearly convinced that for the present at least further struggle was useless, when it flashed into his mind that if he could only get Hercules off to Padam his return alone would give the alarm, and a rescuing party would be sent after his master. Saying, therefore, to the man who held him, "Let me alone; I won't try to get away," and showing by his actions what his words meant, he called out to Hercules, "Go home, Herc! Go home, sir! Off with you!"

The dog ceased his hostile demonstrations at the sound of Kent's voice, looked up into his face with a very puzzled expression for a moment, and then, evidently taking in what he wanted, gave a short,

sharp bark, as though to say, "I understand you; I'll do it," and bounded off in the direction of Padam. The man who had the matchlock tried to stop him with a bullet, but the clumsy firearm made a bad miss, and before he could reload Hercules had vanished around a projecting cliff.

"Now then, what is it that you want of me?" demanded Kent, turning to his captors, after he had seen Hercules safely out of sight.

The men all looked very sulky and threatening, but Kent determined to put on as bold a front as possible, so that, if they could not understand his words, they might be in no mistake about his meaning.

The man who was knocked down by Spy, and the other who was bitten by Hercules, having examined their respective injuries, and attended to them in a rough fashion, the four scoundrels now sat down to confer together, one of them holding the pony's bridle, and the other Kent's arm. They rightly judged that he would not be able to make out a word of their talk, and they could therefore discuss their plans with perfect freedom.

It was a strange and trying situation for Kent, and he certainly carried himself with wonderful fortitude. Here he was, miles away from all help, his father powerless to help him even were he aware of his danger, and no way of making his present peril known unless Hercules should succeed in arousing anxiety concerning him. He closely studied the countenances of the four men as they talked together in low, earnest tones, but there was no ground for encouragement to be found there.

Two of the men were tall, sinewy fellows, of like build with Champ; one of them was short and thick-set; and the fourth a thin, shrunken, weaselfaced man, older than his companions, and who seemed to be their leader. They all had dark, evil-looking countenances, and they from time to time glanced at Kent out of the corners of their eyes in a way that made him shudder.

CHAPTER XV

ROBBERS AND BEARS

As Kent watched the rascals into whose hands he had so unexpectedly fallen, he noticed that his pony Spy seemed to be as much a matter of interest to them as he was himself, and presently it became clear that the conference was not proceeding altogether amicably.

How he did long for the power to understand their talk, which grew more noisy and earnest every minute! The little old man evidently wanted to lay down the law for the others, but they were not willing to accept it at his hands, and the argument grew more heated, until finally all four were upon their feet, talking simultaneously at the top of their voices. Then the old man made some proposition which succeeded in producing a temporary calm, and they all squatted down again.

"I wonder what they're going to do now," soliloquised Kent anxiously. "I hope they don't intend to cut my head off," he added, for one of the

big fellows seemed to be fingering his sword in a suggestive way.

But matters had not got quite so bad as that yet. What they were about to do was to draw lots, and to this they proceeded in a primitive fashion, Kent following every movement with keenest interest, for he realised that his fate was somehow in the issue.

But it soon became evident that the drawing of lots would not prove any more harmonious a transaction than the preceding wrangle had been, and time and time again the leader, if such he could be called when the others so stoutly refused to be controlled by him, manifested a degree of anger that made him seem a very devil incarnate. He would draw his sword and swing it about his head, while fairly shrieking with fury, and once he made a lunge at Kent with the gleaming steel as though he would stab him to the heart.

Yet none of these tactics were of any avail in carrying his point, and having spent his breath and strength for nought, he paused for a moment to consider what he would do next, when the stillness was suddenly broken in a startling manner by the report of rifles, and several bullets whistled through the air just above the heads of the little group, and flattened themselves against the rocks beyond.

Close upon the crack of the firearms came the roar of a mighty dog furious for the attack, and the next instant the leader of the scoundrelly quartette was borne backward to the ground with Hercules at his throat; while the two tall robbers, before their momentary amazement was over, found themselves pinioned in the iron grip of the Sikh and the Goorkha, the fourth member of the gang being left to the care of one of the Thanadar's officers, who promptly knocked him down with the butt of his pistol.

So sudden and silent was the onslaught, so perfect the surprise, and so complete the capture, that Kent was fairly dazed, and for a moment stood there with his mouth wide open and his eyes starting from their sockets, like one bewitched. Presently, however, his wits came back to him, and with a shout of triumph he sprang at Hercules, and strove to pull him off the prostrate man, whose life was in no small danger.

"Easy, Herc! Easy, good dog!" he said persuasively. "Don't kill him, even if he does richly deserve it. Let him alone, there's a good chap."

At the sound of his young master's voice the mastiff ceased his awful muzzling of the wretched man's throat, so suggestive of torn veins and gashed windpipe, but still stood over his victim, the bloody foam that dropped from his tremendous jaw showing that his teeth had not been idle.

"Come off, Herc! Come off, I tell you!" commanded Kent, a sickening feeling passing over him at the sight; and then, as the great brute seemed reluctant to obey, he caught him by his ears, and with a great effort flung him to one side. "Now then, get up, quick," he cried to the robber; "Herc hasn't killed you." The man needed no second bidding. Although the mastiffs teeth had torn the thickest part of his throat badly, they had not touched any vital spot, and he was not rendered helpless.

"Don't you move now one step, or I'll let him at you again," said Kent to him in his fiercest tones, and the frightened wretch stood still, looking the very picture of abject terror and misery as he strove to stanch the wounds in his throat.

By this time both Champ and Bunty had their men safely secured, and were free to exchange greetings with Kent, whose first question was, "Was it Herc got you to come after me?" Both the Sikh and Goorkha tried to answer the question, and so full of joy were they at having made such a timely and effective appearance upon the scene, that neither seemed to notice the other was talking. Kent was therefore fain to exclaim, "Please, don't both speak at once. You tell me how it was, Champ." The Sikh accordingly explained, assisted by additions from Bunty, who could not keep quiet to save his life, that Hercules had come back very

much out of breath, and had shown as plainly as it was possible for a dog to do that he wanted them to return with him.

They confessed they had not at first understood his strange actions, but Mr. Stannard almost immediately grasped their import, and, suspecting that all was not well, had sent them off to see what was the matter. On the way the Thanadar's officer had joined them out of mere curiosity; and so, led by Hercules, who went before at such an impatient pace that they could hardly keep him in sight, they came upon the robbers, with the satisfactory results already detailed.

As night was fast coming on, they now made all haste back to Padam, driving the would-be robbers ahead of them with hands tied behind their backs. On reaching the town the prisoners were handed over to the Thanadar's officers for trial in the morning.

Mr. Stannard was immensely relieved by Kent's return. From the time the servants set out under the guidance of the mastiff he had been worrying greatly, not knowing whether his boy might have been thrown from the pony or fallen into some ravine, or perchance, as was actually the case, have been attacked by robbers.

When Kent had described all that had taken place his father called Hercules to his bedside, and

taking his huge head in both hands, kissed him affectionately on his broad forehead, saying, "You grand, good dog! How can I ever be grateful enough to you for the service you have rendered us to-day?"

Hercules, as a rule, did not appreciate demonstrations of this kind save from Kent, but he seemed to realise this was a special occasion, and submitted with a dignified grace that was quite edifying.

The following morning the foiled highwaymen were put on trial before the Thanadar, and it then appeared from their confession that their evil designs were not so much directed against Kent as against his pony. It seemed that the old man, who was chief of the gang, owned the pony which Spy had defeated, and he had taken such a fancy to the clever little victor that he determined to possess her at any cost. He had accordingly got the other men to help him, but when the capture was effected it turned out that all four of them wanted the pony, and their heated quarrelling over the matter had led to their undoing.

But for the intercession of Kent, who could not bear to think of the poor fellows suffering severely on his account, the Thanadar would have visited condign punishment upon the robbers. As it was, they got off with a month's imprisonment and a sharp warning for the future.

Mr. Stannard was now sufficiently recovered to be anxious to resume the journey. He had been fretting at the delay in Padam, inevitable though it was, and had made up his mind to try proceeding by means of a litter, for which there would be no difficulty in securing bearers, as the wages he offered were liberal enough to tempt the majority of the able-bodied men of the place.

The travellers made quite an imposing party when they started the following morning, after bidding farewell to the kind Thanadar, and giving him a present that thoroughly satisfied him. For Mr. Stannard's litter there were a full dozen of bearers, as the work would be exceedingly trying in view of the rough ground to be traversed. Then, instead of bigarries for all the baggage, tents, &c., several additional ponies and yaks were hired, their owners accompanying them as drivers; and these, with half-a-dozen carriers for general purposes, and the Sikh and Goorkha, constituted a small force that any of the hillmen with plundering propensities would be bound to respect.

Kent, riding upon Spy, reviewed the procession as it moved away from Padam with considerable pride. "We look quite imposing, don't we, Herc?" he said to his unfailing companion. "I wonder what

they'd think of us if we were to go through the streets of London in this fashion. We'd make a big sensation no doubt, and perhaps be hauled up by the bobbies for obstructing the traffic."

Hercules gave a bark that signified, "I'm sure I don't understand what you're saying, but it's all right any way," and bounded ahead to show that he considered his master was being too dilatory; whereupon Kent touched up Spy, and cantered alongside Mr. Stannard's litter. "I hope these fellows are carrying you comfortably, father," he said, with a look of affectionate solicitude. "They look as if they were doing their best to be careful."

"They're getting on famously, Kent," responded Mr. Stannard cheerfully. "It seems absurd for me to have to be on my back like this, but if I attempted to ride I'd only have to lie up again, and we must make Kashmir before anything like that happens."

The first day's journey was an easy and pleasant one, and it was with light hearts and much merry talk that the travellers made good progress. Their way ran first through an open valley, lying between ranges of mountains whose steep slopes clear to their peaks were covered with snow of dazzling purity, while high above their summits arched a sky of cloudless blue, in which great eagles could be seen soaring serenely on expanded pinions.

Close to the river which ran through the bottom of the valley the blazing sun kept the snow in check, and here bloomed many varieties of beautiful autumn flowers, posies of which Kent was ever jumping off Spy to pick and present to his father.

The clear, keen air was full of the music of numberless snow-rivulets rushing down to lose themselves in the river, punctuated by the shrill whistle of marmots standing beside their holes, and exchanging comments, no doubt, upon the strange passers-by.

Hercules made himself utterly ridiculous by furious dashes at the marmots, although he might as well have chased his own shadow so far as any practical results were concerned. The provoking little animals would wait until he was within a few yards of them, and then, with a derisive whistle, take a header into their holes, leaving the mastiff in the lurch in a way that ought to have taught him a lesson. But it did not, for he was always ready for a fresh attempt in spite of the fruitlessness of his former ones. Kent tried several shots at the marmots, with no better results than attended Hercules' efforts. The clever creatures seemed to know the instant of the pulling of the trigger, and would dive out of sight before the bullet reached them.

After this valley, which all were sorry to leave,

came a succession of picturesque small vales, ending in a more open tract of country, on one side of which was a clump of birch bushes that Kent thought it would be well to camp by.

They were now well up in the Pense-la Pass, and surrounded by snow on all sides. Indeed, the tents had to be pitched upon snow, for it was too deep to be swept away; and for the next week the same thing had to be done. Kent took good care that his father was as fully protected from exposure as possible, and the abundance of fuel enabled the servants and bigarries to have roaring fires, which they heartily enjoyed.

Nor was it only for the sake of warmth that the fires were kept burning merrily. The bigarries professed to be very nervous about bears, which they said were numerous in the neighbourhood; and they had so much to say about the size and ferocity of the animals that Kent's hunting spirit was deeply stirred, and he said to his father, "I wouldn't mind if a bear did pay us a visit. We'd have no difficulty in disposing of him, I imagine."

"Don't be too sure, my boy," responded Mr. Stannard, with a smile. "The Himalayan bears are not to be despised when they mean business."

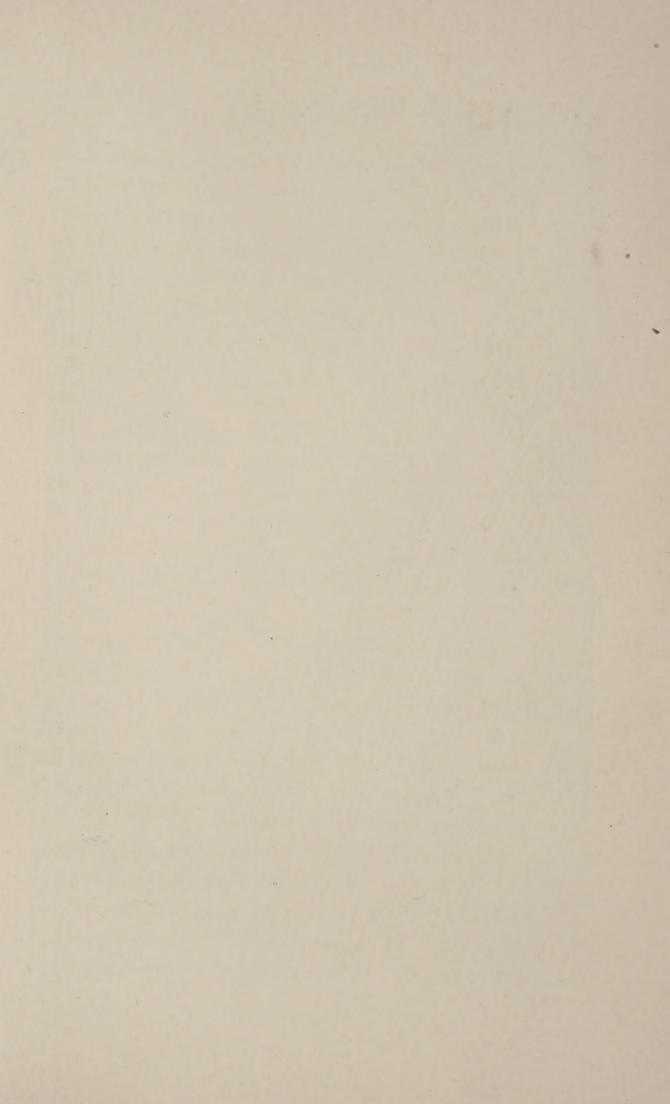
The bears were so much on Kent's mind that he fell to dreaming of them that night, and had such an exciting tussle with a very big fellow in the

course of his dreams that he woke up, and for a moment or two was uncertain as to whether the struggle was not a real one. It was bright moonlight, and he had got so thoroughly awake that he could not at once fall asleep again. Hearing Hercules, who always slept at the tent door, give a deep growl, he arose, and, lifting the flaps, looked out.

The entire camp was buried in slumber, and the neglected fire had nearly burned itself out. From before the tents the mountain-side rose up in a steep slope, on which the moon was pouring the full flood of her silver light, and coming slowly yet steadily down the snowy slope was a dark shape, the sight of which made the boy's heart bound within him and set every nerve a-tingle.

Beyond question it was a bear, and a big fellow too, bent on a visit to the camp, and if not frightened he would soon be within range. In an instant Kent's mind was made up. He would, with only the aid of Hercules, go out to attack the bear. It would indeed be something to boast of if success crowned his venture.

Stepping softly to where his father lay, he made sure he was too sound asleep to be conscious of what was going on. Then he hastened to put on his clothes, and to get together his rifle, revolver, and hunting-knife. He succeeded in accomplishing this





Stalking the Bear.

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without disturbing his father, and in a few minutes was outside the tent ready for the fray. The mastiff at once bounded to his side, and, commanding him to be quiet, Kent stole past the sleeping servants and natives and disappeared in the clump of birch.

He had observed that by creeping through this clump for some distance he could get to one side of the bear, which continued to advance in a cautious, deliberate fashion, and his plan of attack was at once laid down.

He found it hard to restrain Hercules' ardour as they made their way through the bushes, for although the big dog had not as yet detected the presence of the bear, he instinctively divined that some game was afloat, and this rendered him rather obstreperous. But by keeping a heavy hand on his collar, Kent managed to hold him in check until he had carefully worked along through the dense underbrush to the position he sought. The bear now presented his full broadside to him, and was not more than fifty yards away.

Up to this point the creature evidently had no hint of the nearness of danger, but now he stopped short and sniffed about him in a way that showed his suspicions were aroused. Realising that this was his opportunity, Kent took as careful aim as his throbbing pulses permitted, and pulled the

trigger. Almost simultaneously with the report of the rifle Hercules broke out into a fierce roar and rushed at the bear, which had rolled over upon the snow, to all appearances mortally wounded.

Throwing all prudence aside in his exultation at the success of his shot, Kent followed the mastiff, and had just reached the prostrate bear, when, suddenly rising to its feet, it charged at him, and hurled him backwards with such violence that, his head coming in contact with a block of ice, he was rendered insensible.

CHAPTER XVI

INTO THE GARDEN OF EDEN

SEEING that the bear was, to use a popular expression, not killed, but only scotched, Kent could hardly have done anything better than lose his senses; for the wounded brute, finding him utterly inert, took it for granted that he was disposed of, and gave his whole attention to Hercules, who was now making play with him in fine style.

The contest between bear and mastiff was like to be a long and lively one, despite the former's wound, from which blood was flowing freely, had not Bunty now appeared on the scene brandishing his redoubtable Goorkha knife and shouting at the top of his voice. He had no idea that Kent was lying out on the snow insensible, but the noise of the struggle had aroused him, and it was not his nature to let anything in the way of a fight go on without having a hand in the fun.

By the time he reached the two combatants they were so closely locked in a relentless embrace that he could not at first distinguish the one from the

other in the moonlight, and when he did make out which was the mastiff, they rolled about so in their fury that he dared not strike for fear of wounding him.

The combined noises had now awakened the whole camp, and great confusion prevailed, in the midst of which Mr. Stanuard called loudly for Kent, whom he at once missed from the tent.

Getting no response, he naturally enough became much alarmed, and shouted for the Sikh or Goorkha to come to him. But Champ had already hurried to his fellow-servant's support, and so poor Mr. Stannard was left unanswered, while his anxiety grew keener every moment.

"How wretched it is to have to lie here so helplessly," he cried, "when, for aught I know, my boy may be in peril of his life! I must try and get up."

A single attempt, however, was sufficient to prove to him his weakness, and he fell back on his bed with a bitter groan.

Meanwhile Champ had reached Bunty's side, and the two were dancing about the struggling animals in a fashion that would have been highly amusing to a disinterested spectator. At last Bunty saw his opportunity, and with one tremendous stroke of his knife almost cut the bear's head from his shoulders, completely severing the spinal cord, and producing instant death.

Just at this moment Kent recovered his senses, and raising himself to a sitting posture, looked about him in a bewildered way, asking, "Is he dead? Have you killed him?"

This was the first intimation either the Goorkha or Sikh had of their young master's presence, and they both started back in as much surprise as if they had seen a ghost.

Bunty was the first to recover his self-possession, and hastening to Kent's side, he lifted him upon his feet, inquiring anxiously, "Is the young Sahib hurt? Did the vile bear dare to do him any harm?"

Though his head was aching violently, Kent gave a careless laugh as he responded in a voice that quavered a little in spite of himself—

"He bumped my head very hard on the ice, that's all. Which one of you was it killed him? Is Herc wounded at all?"

Bunty having claimed the honour of the kill, Kent, before looking at the bear, called the mastiff to him, and examined him carefully for signs of injury. To his great relief, there seemed to be none of any account, the dog's thick coat of hair having efficiently protected him; and Kent now turned his attention to the bear.

This proved to be an unusually fine specimen. Though not so large as the ordinary brown bear, and not more than half the bulk of the great grizzly, it was still quite a formidable animal. The fur was glossy black, except on the chest, where a white chevron showed conspicuously, stretching from shoulder to shoulder, and looking more like some artificial decoration than a natural feature.

From this mark the bear got its scientific name, Ursus torquatus, as Kent learned from Mr. Stannard when the latter was able to look at the creature the following morning.

Of course, when it was all over Kent hastened back to the tent, where he found his father as near to being in a fury as he ever saw him in his life. The poor man, distracted with anxiety and fuming at his own helplessness, had been shouting and calling in vain until he was exhausted, and when Kent appeared his first question, asked in a tone of decided asperity, was—

"Where have you been, sir? What's the meaning of all this disturbance? Why did you go out without letting me know?"

In the high excitement of his daring enterprise and its thrilling dénouement, Kent had for the time completely forgotten his father, and when triumph perched so signally upon his banners, he had hurried back to the tent in the full glow of pride at his exploit. But his father's question checked him

like so much cold water suddenly splashed in his face, and instead of pouring out his story in his usual way, he stood abashed and tongue-tied, for only at that moment did it dawn upon him that he had really acted in a very undutiful way.

"What's the matter with you? Why don't you explain yourself?" demanded Mr. Stannard in the same sharp tone.

In a very hesitating, humble way, Kent then proceeded to relate what had taken place, and as the story proceeded it was evident his father's ire abated, until at length it vanished entirely, and with one of his hearty laughs he threw himself back on his camp-bed, exclaiming—

"A chip off the old block, verily! It's no use my preaching to you, Kent, to be cautious and prudent, and all that. You'd need to be born again, and off some other stock, to take into account the dangers of anything that offered good sport. I forgive you, my boy, for I know I would have done exactly the same myself under the circumstances. The verdict is, 'Not guilty, but don't do it again.'"

Greatly relieved at this turn of affairs, Kent went back to bed, and being thoroughly tired out, slept soundly until his father roused him late the next morning.

On awaking he was glad to find his headache

gone, although his head was still sore at the spot where it had come in contact with the ice. To his great disappointment the skin of the bear proved to be utterly worthless, owing to its being so saturated with oil, as the animal was very fat at that time of the year.

"You'll have to come earlier in the season, Kent," said Mr. Stannard, smiling at his chagrin. "These bears always get as fat as porpoises before going into their winter quarters. But you can console yourself with the reflection that at their best the skins are not of much account. Come along now, we must be getting ahead."

The difficulties and dangers of the next two days' travel in many respects exceeded any previous experience. Their way led over the col of the Pense-la Pass, and compelled them to climb the rocky slopes of the great glacier which flowed over it. This proved such extremely tedious and tiring work, that when they had ascended some distance they ventured out on the bosom of the glacier, which was covered with an immensely thick sheet of snow, into which the horses sank almost to the girths.

Nor was the difficulty of getting through the snow the only troublesome feature of the day's trial. There are no glaciers without crevasses, and as the snow completely masked all that there were in the Pense-la Pass glacier, the travellers had perforce to push on, trusting to luck rather than to any ability to detect the dangers under foot.

In addition to all this, there was the blazing, blinding sunshine, which, coming through the rarefied atmosphere (they were nearly fifteen thousand feet above sea-level), and being reflected from the vast sheets of spotless snow, had tremendous power. By way of protection, Kent wore heavy blue goggles over his eyes and a thick veil on his face, and yet his skin seemed to fairly burn, and peeled off in great patches, causing him intense discomfort.

In view of so many sources of anxiety and suffering, there were naturally no eyes for the surrounding scenery, superb as it was, and the whole party ploughed their way through the snow in complete silence save for the cries of the drivers to the yaks and ponies they had in charge.

Mr. Stannard's litter had to keep in the rear, so that its bearers might have the benefit of the path beaten by the others, and as he was able to be entirely sheltered from the sun's rays, he got along very comfortably.

To spend the night on the glacier was a thing not to be considered, if it could by any possibility be avoided; so, in spite of possible crevasses and merciless sunshine, the party plodded on hour after hour, with the satisfactory result of finally making their way down a steep snow-slope leading to a narrow valley, along which they continued until they reached a clump of brush in a sheltered place, where they went into camp with the assurance of having abundant firewood in hand.

The next morning Mr. Stannard declared himself sufficiently recovered to ride one of the ponies instead of being toted along on the litter, and he had quite an ovation from the servants and carriers when he made his appearance in the saddle.

There were no more glaciers to be crossed for some time, the road running through a series of beautiful open valleys, whose principal inhabitants seemed to be large brown marmots, called *Pea* by the Thibetans, from their peculiar cry.

Kent of course took a shot at them occasionally, and succeeded in bagging several, but had great difficulty in securing them, they dived so quickly into their holes, unless killed outright at the first shot. The skins were in prime condition, and Mr. Stannard was very glad to have them.

Three days of this pleasant and easy travelling brought them to Suru, where they passed out of the Thibetan regions into the territory of Kashmir.

Mr. Stannard was in high spirits as they settled into camp at Suru. "We're all right now, I think, Kent," he said, rubbing his hands complacently.

"Barring accidents, we'll reach the Garden of Eden in another week."

"The Garden of Eden, father!" exclaimed Kent.
"Why, what do you mean? The Garden of Eden isn't up among these mountains here, is it?"

Mr. Stannard laughed at his son's surprise.

"It's only a legend, my boy," he replied. "But when you see the Vale of Kashmir you'll not wonder at such a notion having got into people's minds."

But although Suru was within Kashmir territory, there was still some difficult and dangerous country to be traversed before the traditional Garden of Eden would open before the eyes of the eager travellers.

This part of the journey occupied several days, and was full of exciting incidents. Thus, half-way between Suru and Kartse, at a place where the path was extremely narrow and ran athwart precipices and steep slopes of shingle, Kent, riding ahead on Spy, met a native also on pony-back. There was no room for the ponies to pass each other, and no possibility of turning from right to left. What was to be done? The native did not seem at all inclined to retreat, while Kent, remembering that he represented the caravan now close behind him, could not think of giving ground.

For a few minutes he was puzzled how to act, as he could not make himself understood to the other. Then, realising that it was an occasion for action, not indecision, he drew his revolver, and, pointing it at the native, said in the sternest voice he could muster—

"Right about face now, and go back to some place that's wide enough to let me get by you."

The native laid hold of his sword, and for a moment it seemed as if a duel à l'outrance were inevitable. Then he suddenly changed his mind, and began to back his pony, looking as sulky as a sick bear all the time; but he kept at it until a widening of the ledge gave space enough for Kent to go past him. By this time both Champ and Bunty had come up, and if the irate native entertained any notion of giving Kent a sudden shove over the precipice as he went by him, he was fain to leave it unfulfilled.

Then, again, the crossing of the Omba Pass proved an unexpectedly heavy bit of work that kept the party out until far into the night. Long slopes of snow had to be crept across by the uncertain light of a crescent moon, and the height of sixteen thousand feet was reached before the summit of the pass had been overcome. Then came the descent into the darkness of the valleys. Kent could not repress a shudder of fear as the guide led the way into a deep gorge where it was impossible to ride, and where he could not see a yard in front of him.

The passage through this gorge was one of the

worst experiences in the whole trip. The way led along the bed of a stream full of boulders, over which different members of the party were continually stumbling. Then at frequent intervals were pools of water thinly coated with ice, which broke under foot, while more than once they came to sudden descents where one man had to be let down first that the others might climb down on his shoulders.

It was not far from midnight when this tremendous day's tramp came to an end in a sheltered valley abounding in brushwood, that was soon blazing up cheerfully, and giving light for the erection of the tents.

But the worst of the journey had been got over; and the tired travellers could afford to sleep late next morning, which, indeed, none of them failed to do, so that it was midday before they set off again.

There remained yet one more pass, the Zoji-la, but this was only a trifle of twelve thousand feet high, and, in spite of a disagreeable rain, they made good time over it; and then they came at once into the rich woodland scenery of Kashmir, which was inexpressibly grateful and refreshing after the almost treeless territory in which they had spent so many eventful weeks.

"O father, how beautiful this is!" Kent ex-

claimed, looking around with eyes full of admiration and delight at the wide level meadows, enamelled with flowers and threaded by a silver stream, beyond whose borders rose ranges of mountains whose lower slopes were richly clothed with foliage already glowing with the splendid pageantry of autumn. "I am beginning to understand why they imagined the Garden of Eden to be here."

"You'll understand it better when we get really into the Kashmir Valley, Kent," responded his father. "We are only on the fringe of it yet."

They pushed on rapidly, for Mr. Stannard had by this time completely regained his wonted vigour, and presently came to Srinagar, the capital city. Here the extraordinary beauty of the valley fully revealed itself to the eyes of the ravished travellers, and they felt that they were well rewarded for all the labours and perils of their journey thither.

"It gives me a strange sense of satisfaction to have at last reached the place, Kent," said Mr. Stannard. "I've been cherishing the notion since my first year in India, and I'm awfully glad you're with me to share the realisation of my dream."

"You're not more glad than I am, father," responded Kent, hugging his father's arm affectionately. "And are we going to spend the winter here?"

"That's my present plan," answered Mr. Stan-

nard. "I must see about getting comfortable quarters right away."

With his wonted energy he addressed himself to the business of getting settled, and Kent was free to indulge his spirit of enterprise by doing the city on his own account.

As a matter of course this led him into various adventures, one of which threatened at first to assume a rather serious aspect, and yet never was person more innocent of giving offence or breaking the law than Kent on this occasion.

CHAPTER XVII

A CHAPTER OF ADVENTURES

It was the morning after their arrival that Kent sallied forth alone, save for the companionship of Hercules, to see the lions of Srinagar; Mr. Stannard, accompanied by his two servants by way of increasing his dignity, having gone to seek an audience with the Maharajah.

The day was fine and bright, the air pleasantly cool, and Kent in excellent spirits, for he rejoiced at the prospect of a lengthened stay in so beautiful a place.

"There'll be no trouble about putting in the winter here," he soliloquised, as his eyes ranged over the wonderful scenery of the Kashmir Valley, and then turned to the quaint and curious sights that were round about him. "I'll be able to have lots of boating, and of bathing too, until the water gets too cold; and there must be some good hunting in those woods at the foot of the mountains."

Of boating and bathing there certainly need be no lack, for the whole wide valley was intersected by gently flowing streams, and broad reaches of placid river almost worthy to be called lakes.

But it was neither boating nor bathing that Kent had in mind that morning; he wanted to "do the town" first, and so he strode along with keen eyes for all that was of interest to him.

Presently he found himself by the banks of the river Jhelam, which forms the chief highway to the city, and is always crowded with boats. Having spent an hour watching the boats glide to and fro, and listening to the strange cries of the boatmen, he turned back, intending to make a short cut to his starting-point. In order to do this he had to cross a large field wherein were grazing some cattle, and had he not for the moment forgotten one of Hercules' bad habits, he would certainly not have entered the enclosure.

It was not until the mastiff bounced away from him barking furiously, and charging upon the cattle as though he was minded to devour at least a couple of them, that his young master realised his error.

"Come back, Herc! Come back here, you rascal!" he shouted angrily. "Leave those cows alone!"

But if Hercules heard him, he did not obey him. On the contrary, he bayed only the more fiercely, and sprang at the animals' throats in a way that threatened serious injury to some of them if he was not summarily checked.

Provoked by his dog's conduct, and apprehensive of its getting him into trouble, Kent picked up a large stick from the ground, and rushed after him, swinging the stick over his head, and crying—

"Down, Herc, down, or I'll thrash the life out of you!"

The panic-stricken cattle had stampeded towards one corner of the field, followed by the mastiff and, of course, by Kent, and they were there huddled up in a closely packed mass, when there suddenly appeared on the other side of the stone wall four Kashmir soldiers, whose swarthy countenances expressed such horror and indignation that Kent was fairly struck spell-bound, and the uplifted stick dropped to his side.

For a moment they seemed undecided which to first throw themselves upon, the dog or his master. Then one of them grunted out something, where-upon they divided forces, two of them making for Kent, and two for Hercules. If ever the mastiff showed his sagacity, it was then; for, instead of showing fight, as Kent fully expected he would, he suddenly stopped baying at the cattle, took one good look at the coming soldiers, and—bolted incontinently, leaving his master to face the music alone.

Kent felt no less hurt than astonished at this unexpected desertion; but he had no time to nurse his imagination, for all four of the soldiers now turned their attention on him, and their bearing was so menacing that almost instinctively he began to apologise for his dog's misbehaviour.

"I'm really very sorry that Herc chased the cows," he said in quite a humble tone. "I never knew him do such a thing before, and I shall certainly give him a tremendous thrashing as soon as I get hold of him."

He had no idea how far the men would understand him. He simply spoke what was in his heart, and was therefore highly indignant when, instead of accepting his apology, they threw themselves upon him as though he had been a violent malefactor, and proceeded to bind his hands behind his back with the girdle of one of their number.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, too full of wrath at this indignity to have room for fear. "What right have you to treat me in this way?"

But they took no notice of his irate protests, and when he strove mightily to burst his bonds, one of them, who seemed to be the chief of the quartette, drew forth an ugly-looking dagger, and pointed it meaningly at Kent's throat.

This threat was not without effect. Kent's common-sense now came to his rescue, and realising that further resistance was not only vain, but might lead to serious consequences, he ceased both speech and struggle, and resigned himself to his fate. All the time he was marvelling what offence he could have committed. That he was in the hands of the authorities seemed clear enough, for his captors certainly were not highway robbers. Beyond that, however, he was entirely in the dark.

"Oh, well," he finally said to himself, as he trudged along he knew not whither, with the four soldiers forming a bodyguard about him, "I'll be taken before some kind of a magistrate, I suppose, and then I'll know what it's all about."

The soldiers went back into the city, and while passing through one of the streets whom should they meet but Bunty, who had a little while before been despatched by Mr. Stannard in quest of Kent.

On seeing the boy in so strange a plight the faithful Goorkha's swarthy countenance first expressed blank amazement, and then fierce indignation, and clapping his hand on his huge knife, it seemed for a minute as though he would rush upon the soldiers single-handed.

But Kent called out to him, "Take care, Bunty. Don't do that. It'll only make matters worse. Come along with them, and see if you can't help me out of this scrape."

Very reluctantly Bunty withdrew his hand from his knife and did as he was bid, keeping so close to the little group that the soldiers glanced apprehensively at him, evidently fearing that the big knife might yet be brought into play.

Thus escorted, Kent presently reached the palace of the Maharajah, where the soldiers handed him over to an important-looking official, with a report as to the reasons for his arrest. Bunty followed sturdily, scorning the half-hearted efforts of the soldiers to detain him, and soon they came into the presence of a grave, grey-bearded, dignified official, who was evidently a kind of magistrate.

Not until then did Kent learn what the trouble was and why he had been arrested.

The magistrate being a Hindoo, Bunty understood his language, and acted as interpreter. When Kent was then told the charge against him, his first impulse was to break into a laugh, it seemed so utterly trivial; but, noting the concern on the devoted Goorkha's countenance, he restrained himself by an effort, and strove to put himself right.

It seemed that the Maharajah and all the ruling caste in Kashmir were Hindoos, and, of course, an important principle in their religion was profound reverence for cattle. The cow was so sacred an animal that it must not be abused in any way, while to kill it for eating purposes was almost a capital offence.

Now the herd of cattle that Hercules had so inopportunely chased belonged to no less a personage than the Maharajah himself, and as, according to the statements of the soldiers, Kent had been aiding and abetting the sacrilegious conduct of his dog, it was plain enough that he had got himself into an awkward fix.

So soon as Kent realised this he sent Bunty off for his father, feeling confident that he would be able to straighten out matters for him. Mr. Stannard, on being informed of his son's plight, at once went to the British Resident, and having secured his good offices, hastened to the palace, where Kent greeted him joyously.

"O father, I'm so glad you've come!" he exclaimed. "They're trying to scare the life out of me here, when I have not done any harm at all."

"You're not easily scared, are you, my boy?" responded Mr. Stannard cheerily; and then, taking out his pocket-knife, he severed the girdle which bound Kent's wrists and threw it indignantly upon the floor, saying, "Did they take you for some desperate character that they tied you up that way?"

The magistrate frowned at this summary proceeding, but the British Resident said something to him that restored the amiable expression to his face.

The whole matter was then gone into, with the result that Kent succeeded in satisfying the magistrate that neither he nor his dog had any thought

of showing disrespect to the State religion; and on Mr. Stannard undertaking to see that the mastiff was henceforth kept chained up, or not allowed out except in leash, the magistrate expressed himself satisfied, and Kent was released.

Oddly enough, before a week had passed Hercules got into another scrape, and again it was with the Maharajah's animals.

Kent and his father had him out with them one day for a walk, Kent leading him by a long strap, when, in the suburbs of the city, they encountered a hunting-party returning from the mountains.

The Maharajah was one of the party, and his servants were leading several dogs that had been in the chase. They were splendid creatures, longer and higher in body even than Hercules, but not so strongly framed, and somewhat resembling Newfoundland dogs in the colour and character of their fur.

Not anticipating any trouble, Kent stopped to admire them, exclaiming, "Just look, father! Aren't those huge fellows? Why, I believe they're bigger than Hercules!"

The words had hardly left his mouth, when Hercules let out a roar worthy of an African lion, and with a plunge that tore the strap from Kent's hand, rushed at one of the hunting-dogs as though it were some beast of prey.

Instantly there was wild confusion Mr. Stannard and Kent doing their best to haul the mastiff off his prostrate victim, while the latter's mates strained at their leashes in frantic eagerness to join in the row, and the swarthy servants shouted and rushed around, seeming to have completely lost their wits.

The Maharajah had been some distance behind, but, seeing the disturbance, galloped up, and angrily asked what was the matter. One look from his own eyes was sufficient to afford him an answer, and, his face suddenly blazing with wrath, he gave orders that his dog's assailant should be killed at once.

Happily Mr. Stannard overheard the command, and although there was certainly no excuse for Hercules, he was very loath to have the creature killed, seeing how much attached to him Kent was. He accordingly at once placed himself in front of the still struggling dogs, saying firmly yet politely, "My dog must not be killed, your Excellency. I will be answerable for any injury he may do."

Recognising Mr. Stannard, the Maharajah checked his anger, and responded with equal courtesy—"Your wishes shall be respected, Sahib. Will you please see if you can separate the dogs?"

Just at that moment Hercules drew off a little for a front attack, and seizing the opportunity, Kent caught him around the neck and held him back. But he had to suffer for his interference. With marvellous quickness, the hunting-dog sprang at his assailant, and his great teeth caught one of Kent's hands as in a vice.

The pain was so intense as almost to make him faint, and having to let go Hercules, the fight would instantly have been renewed, had not Mr. Stannard grasped the mastiff at the same moment as two of the Maharajah's servants got hold of their dog, and the combatants were finally separated.

Of course Mr. Stannard made every possible apology for the misconduct of the mastiff, and it being found that the hunting-dog was not seriously injured, thanks to his thick fur, the matter was smoothed over satisfactorily, and the whole party returned together to the city.

"Now, Kent," said Mr. Stannard when they got back to their own quarters, "you must have a muzzle made for Hercules immediately. He can't be unchained again until it is on."

Kent quite concurred in this, and so a stout muzzle was procured; and, strange to say, when it was put on, much against his will, it seemed to take all the fight out of the mastiff. He became as gentle as a spaniel, and never attempted to fly at anything in the street, so that Kent could safely take him with him wherever he went.

The more Kent saw of the Kashmir Valley the more inclined he was to accept the legend of its having been the original Garden of Eden. Although they had come to it in the autumn, vegetation was still fresh and verdurous; indeed the verdure lasted all through the winter, so that it might be said with truth of this wonderful region, "There eternal summer dwells."

The rich green plains, studded with groves of elms and plane-trees, or laid with stately lines of poplars, were intersected in every direction by gentle streams and sluggish canals, while here and there rivers expanded into broad reaches worthy of the name of lakes.

Along these water-ways Kent delighted to glide in one of the light boats to be had at the city, and in the management of which he soon became so expert that he would often leave the boatman behind when he went out for a row.

Within easy reach of Srinagar was the beautiful Dal Lake, an expanse of transparent water seven miles long by three miles wide, and here Kent saw the famous floating islands of which he had heard so much. They certainly were very curious affairs, being formed by the reeds, sedges, water-lilies, and other aquatic plants growing together in riotous confusion, and entwining their stems until they formed a matted mass, which presently would break

away from its roots and go floating off. The people living on the borders of the lake would then spread out the leaves of these plants over the stems, and covering them with a layer of earth, plant melons and cucumbers, which grew luxuriantly. The islands thus became floating gardens, and upon some of them vines were cultivated successfully, so that they formed valuable possessions.

On one of their excursions to Dal Lake, Kent went off alone to one of these islands, while his father was exploring the ruins of an old temple which did not interest his son at all. There were many fine melons on this island, and Kent's mouth watered as he saw them sleeping on its surface in their green and golden beauty.

At last he made up his mind that he must have one of them, for they seemed altogether too luscious to be left untasted.

"I wonder where the owner of this island is," he said to himself, looking around in all directions. "I'd be glad to pay him whatever he wants for a good big melon," and he clinked some silver coins in his pocket.

But there was no owner in sight, and allowing the righteous intention to pay if he could to quiet the prickings of conscience, Kent ran his boat alongside the island, and landed on its quaking bosom. The best melons were in the centre of the island, and thinking that he might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, he cautiously picked his way thither. After some deliberation he at length selected his melon, and having picked it up, was just about to return to the boat, when the treacherous soil gave way beneath him, and he sank to his shoulders in the muck.

Nor was this the full measure of his misfortune; for, on turning his eyes shoreward in quest of aid, he saw hastening towards the island a boat containing two men, whose faces betokened that they were bent on avenging the trespass on their property.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STORMING OF NILT FORTRESS

THINKING only of the danger of being swallowed up in the foul, tenacious muck, Kent shouted to the approaching man, "Quick! quick! I'm sinking fast!" Whereat one of them gave him a ferocious scowl that plainly showed what his intentions were.

In another minute they had reached the island, and springing ashore recklessly—for they were too angry to pick their steps—made their way to Kent's side.

By a desperate effort he had succeeded in getting his feet upon a bunch of roots that afforded him support, and was thus enabled to free his arms.

The first intention of the men was undoubtedly to fall upon him and belabour him soundly, but just as they came within striking distance Kent waved them off with his arms, shouting in a warning tone, "Don't you dare strike me; I'm English."

The last word in the sentence was probably the only one they understood, but it was sufficient to give them pause.

They came to a full stop, and whispered together earnestly, Kent being able to make out the word "Sahib."

Then they both looked at him carefully, while he exclaimed impatiently, "Hurry up, won't you, and get me out of this beastly hole!"

Suddenly the expression of their countenances changed. Anger gave way to surprise, and then to interest, and after a few more words together, one went to each side of Kent, and taking him under the arms, in a trice they had him up on firmer ground.

"Thank you very much," said Kent, offering his hand to them, the meaning of which, however, they evidently did not understand, and therefore failed to reciprocate. "But I'm in an awful mess, to be sure," he continued, looking down ruefully at his reeking garments. "How on earth am I to get this horrible stuff cleaned off?"

The men were now talking together, and pointing at the melon, which had fallen from Kent's hands when he tumbled in, and lay among the leaves in front of him. He noted their glances, and saying pleasantly, "Oh, that's all right; I'll pay for that," he took some coins out of his pocket and offered them in payment.

This honourable proceeding cleared away all the clouds. Both men grew amiable at once, and

having accepted the coins, manifested their utmost eagerness to be helpful. With their aid Kent cleaned up as best he could, and then went to rejoin his father, not forgetting to take the melon along.

Mr. Stannard was greatly amused when the adventure was described to him.

"That was a happy thought of yours proclaiming yourself English, Kent," he said. "We are well thought of by the people here, and they would not do anything to offend us. I hope your melon will prove worth all the trouble you had in getting it."

They had the melon at dinner that night, and it proved so luscious and exquisite of flavour that Kent declared he would be quite willing to endure a similar experience in order to procure another.

In riding, hunting, sight-seeing, boating, and making the acquaintance of the people the winter months slipped quickly and pleasantly by, and the time came to lay out the programme for the spring season.

Mr. Stannard was somewhat undecided what to do. There were many attractive plans open before him, and he was weighing one against another, while Kent gave his opinion freely, when news came to Kashmir that at once gave a definite direction to his thoughts.

Some two hundred and fifty miles to the north of Srinagar stood Gilgit, the farthest outpost of the Indian Empire, and the key to all the good passes over the Hindoo Koosh mountains into India. As may be easily imagined, it was, from a strategic point of view, a place of the first importance, keeping open as it did the way to Chitral, that invaluable buffer against the aggressions of the relentless Russian bear.

When, therefore, the alarming report was brought that Gilgit was threatened by the Hunza-Nagars, the blood-thirsty mountaineers who never ceased fighting each other except to combine against some common foe, it caused great excitement in Kashmir, and the Maharajah's Government and the British representatives at once took counsel together to meet the emergency.

The result of their deliberation was, that they determined to despatch as promptly as possible a force sufficient not only to foil the tribesmen's designs, but to prevent their making another attempt in the future.

So soon as this was decided upon, Mr. Stannard asked permission to join the expedition. His request was granted at once, and Kent learned of his father's project with unqualified delight.

"And will we take Champ and Bunty with us?" he asked eagerly.

"Why, certainly, Kent," replied Mr. Stannard.

"They will be very useful to us."

"And may Herc come too?" Kent asked again, this time with some uncertainty in his tone.

Mr. Stannard looked thoughtful; indeed he was about to say "No," when a glance at the boy's anxious, entreating countenance made him change his mind. "Oh, I suppose so," he responded, with a certain show of reluctance, whereupon Kent sprang at him and gave him a great hug, exclaiming—

"You dear old pater, you; you're just as good as you can be! I'm so glad you don't mind Herc coming too."

After any amount of bustle and bother, the little army that was to teach the tribesmen a lesson in right behaviour got itself to Gilgit in good order and condition, Kent enjoying every stage of the journey thither, because of the novelty and interest of his surroundings. The little mountain town, thus become so suddenly a centre of intense life and activity, swarmed with soldiers, of whom some two thousand were assembled.

Kent at once set himself to get acquainted with the different kinds of troops, and by the end of a couple of days could have passed a highly creditable examination upon their various characteristics.

There were sturdy, swarthy Goorkhas, with whom Bunty promptly fraternised joyously; grave and stalwart Sikhs, among whom Champ found many friends; tall, wiry Pathans, with the speed and endurance of deerhounds; and odd little Punialis, who insisted upon retaining their native swords and shields, although they were all armed with good carbines.

The officers were mainly English, and made up a very pleasant and congenial circle, to which Mr. Stannard and Kent found themselves cordially welcomed.

While the main body of troops was winding its slow way along through the deep rocky valleys, the staff officers pushed on ahead, the Stannards accompanying them, and presently reached the Kotal, a lofty peak, from whose summit could be obtained a clear view of the Kanjut Valley, in the heart of which stood Nilt Fort, whose thick walls and tall towers promised a stern resistance, for there the enemy lay in waiting.

"That fort looks as if it would give us some fun before it is taken, Mr. Stannard," said the commanding officer, who had been studying it through his field-glass.

"It does indeed, Colonel Durand," replied Mr. Stannard. "If the case were reversed, and you had the fort, with plenty of supplies and ammunition,

I think you might safely defy all the tribes in the country round about to turn you out; but I expect you'll not be long in taking it by storm."

On the following day the preparations for attacking the fort began, and Kent watched them with keenest interest. It would be his first taste of real warfare, and his heart burned to take part in it himself; but to this his father would not at all consent.

"No, no, my boy," he said firmly. "I didn't bring you here to make you a target for these blood-thirsty heathens. It will be time enough for you to share in the fighting when it falls to your duty to do so. In this case you are simply a spectator, and must conduct yourself accordingly."

Omitting no precaution against surprises and sudden attacks, the British force, now reduced to a thousand men, the others having been left as garrisons on the way, advanced along the maidan by the river-side, crossing frightful nullahs and scrambling up rocky slopes, until at last it reached the terraces before Nilt, and the mountaineers' citadel stood within striking distance. It was certainly a formidable place to attack, seeing that the British had with them none of the requisites for a siege, and only a couple of seven-pounder field-guns for artillery.

Nilt was a very rabbit-warren of strongly built stone houses, two or three stories high, with narrow alleys between, and the whole enclosed by a great stone wall fifteen to twenty feet in height and twelve feet thick, with large square towers at intervals. Another wall about eight feet high, and loopholed for musketry, surrounded the main wall; and beyond it the ground fell away precipitously on all sides, save at one point where there was a narrow approach to the chief gate.

Such was the place which the peculiar situation of the invading force rendered it necessary to capture in a few hours, although the Kanjutis flattered themselves that it could hold out for a year or more.

With a rare mingling of caution and daring, the commanding officer laid out his plan of attack, and with a really remarkable degree of intelligence and docility, the native troops put his commands into execution.

The Nilt garrison deemed themselves thoroughly secure behind their massive stone walls, whose many loopholes commanded every avenue of approach, so that it meant no small risk to get near enough to the fort to send in an effective fire. Yet the plucky little Goorkhas advanced blithely across the broken ground, making short rushes, and utilising every bit of cover until they were within short range, and could open a brisk fire upon the riflemen at the loopholes and upon the parapets.

While they were doing this, the Punialis swarmed up a height which commanded the fort and peppered away from that point, the Sikhs, under the cover of their fire, venturing to descend the hill into the trench before the fort, and then audaciously firing into the loopholes only a few yards distant.

Mr. Stannard had taken Kent up to a bluff at the edge of the river-cliff, whence a clear view of the whole proceedings could be obtained, and here they stood watching everything with breathless interest, Kent crying out from time to time in enthusiastic admiration of the daring and address of the different bodies of troops engaged in the attack.

Not far from them the Gatling gun and the two seven-pounders had got into position, and blazed away at Nilt, without, however, doing any great damage, the walls of the fortress being so tremendously thick.

The siege had gone on for over an hour without the British force gaining any appreciable advantage, when Kent's keen eyes detected through the smoke and dust below a band of men, not more than a hundred in all, making a rush for the outer wall.

"Look! father, look!" he cried, grasping his father excitedly by the arm. "They're going to storm the fort!"

"With such a handful of men!" exclaimed Mr. Stannard, his face expressing both astonishment

and disapproval. "Why, they must be mad! They'll never reach the inner wall alive, let alone go over it."

If the members of the little storming party were mad, there certainly was much method in their madness. Charging across the open space, regardless of the hail of bullets from the fort, they came to the wooden gate of the outer wall, which the Goorkhas quickly hacked into splinters with their irresistible kukris.

The daring fellows were now in front of the main wall, and so close to it that the officers fired their revolvers into the loopholes. It seemed as if every one of them must be shot down, and the fall of several brought sympathetic groans from Kent, who was in danger of tumbling over the edge of the cliff in the intensity of his feelings.

Yet Captain Aylmer, accompanied by his Pathan orderly, dashed gallantly forward to the main gate, which was very strongly built, and placing a heavy charge of gun-cotton at its foot, fixed and ignited the fuse, all the while being exposed to the fire from the towers which flanked the gate, as well as from loopholes in the gate itself. The coolness no less than the brilliancy of this feat was beyond all praise, and Kent was simply spell-bound with admiration, so that he could only murmur, "Oh! I hope he won't be shot!"

Captain Aylmer was shot, and at such short range that his clothes and flesh were burned by the gunpowder. Happily, however, it was only a nasty flesh-wound in the leg, that did not put him hors de combat.

There were some moments of thrilling suspense as the expected explosion was awaited. But no explosion came; and Captain Aylmer, who had retreated a little distance along the wall, was seen to return to the gate, readjust the fuse, and, after several attempts, get it properly lighted. While accomplishing this he was again wounded, one hand being terribly crushed by a big stone hurled from the battlements. Next moment there came a tremendous explosion, and the air was full of dust and flying stones; but, without waiting for either to clear away, the British officers and their handful of Goorkhas rushed through the breach, and engaged in a hand-to-hand conflict with the garrison.

At first they were so few in numbers that it seemed as if they must be driven back or killed where they stood, and one of the officers returned for reinforcements, thus exposing himself to a double danger, the fire from the walls and the covering fire of his own supporters. Yet in a few minutes he was back again untouched, and accompanied by a number of Goorkhas and Sikhs, who charged through the gate and into the narrow

alleys, driving the defenders of the fort before them like chaff before the wind.

One rush did it. The Kanjutis stayed not upon the order of their going, but went at once, fleeing through the back gate of the fort and down into Nilt nullah behind, where they found refuge among the numerous sangas which had been erected in the nullah or on the opposite heights.

Great were the rejoicings in the British camp at the capture of the fortress of Nilt. Captain Aylmer and his gallant associates came in for unstinted praise, and the commanding officer let it be known that at least three recommendations for the Victoria Cross would be made by him.

Kent was very proud of the way the Goorkhas and Sikhs had borne themselves, and he congratulated Champ and Bunty as warmly upon the conduct of their tribesmen as if they were all their own brothers.

But although Nilt was taken, there was plenty of work yet to be done. The Kanjutis still held the valley by virtue of their forts and sangas on the opposite heights, from which they must needs be cleared. This was likely to be a business requiring time and patience, so the little army set about securing quarters until the way should be clear to go on.

The following days were full of skirmishes and

artillery duels (for the natives had some small cannon of their own), without any definite result being accomplished. Kent each day grew increasingly impatient to be allowed to join one of these skirmishing parties, but Mr. Stannard would not give his consent.

At last one afternoon, when Mr. Stannard had gone up on the heights and Kent had remained behind, the boy's eagerness overcame his sense of filial duty, and he joined a small band of Goorkhas sent out on a reconnaisance.

Finding the coast clear, as they imagined, they advanced farther than they should have done, and suddenly found themselves in a trap. A heavy volley from jezails and Winchesters was poured upon them by hidden marksmen. Several of the party fell, mortally wounded. There was no resource but flight, and Kent had joined with the others in showing his heels, when he tripped upon a loose stone and fell headlong, just as the Kanjutis rushed howling after their enemies. The next moment they were upon him.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE IN THE CLOUDS

When Kent realised that he was a prisoner in the hands of the Kanjutis his heart almost stood still for terror. While with the British forces he had heard many blood-curdling tales of the ferocity and cruelty of these hill-men, and he expected nothing else than that he would be subjected to horrible tortures and ultimate death at their hands.

Indeed, for that matter, to judge from first appearances, his expectation was not ill founded, his captors manifested such malignant glee at having him in their power, and hastened away so eagerly to their stronghold beyond the *nullah*, chattering volubly to one another as they ran.

"I suppose they're talking about what they'll do with me when they get me over there," poor Kent soliloquised, his mind filled with the darkest apprehensions. "I wish I could make out what they are saying."

Had he been able to do so he would hardly have been much wiser as to his fate, for it soon appeared that there was a very decided difference of opinion upon the point, some crying out for putting the young Sahib thus at their mercy to the torture, while cooler heads advocated keeping him as a prisoner who might be exchanged to advantage.

Kent was taken to the Thol fort, on the far side of the Nilt nullah—a citadel not so strong in itself as Nilt, but having a better natural situation, and being more fully protected by sangas along the edge of the cliff in front of it and upon the heights above.

This Thol fort, and its mate, the Maiun fort, on the opposite side of the Kanjut river, completely commanded the valley, and until they were both taken by the British the expedition could not ad vance a yard beyond Nilt.

On reaching the fort Kent was rudely flung into a dark, noisome den of a place, with low stone roof and earthen floor, and left there to vex his soul with vain conjectures as to his doom.

Never before in his life had he been in circumstances of such utter misery. There was absolutely no redeeming feature about his case. He had gone out with the skirmishing party in direct disobedience to his father's commands. He had been captured, not when boldly facing the enemy, but when ignobly fleeing before them, and now he was a help-less prisoner, not even able to plead for mercy were he disposed to do so.

"Ah, Kent!" he murmured, shaking his head sorrowfully, "you've brought this all upon yourself and, whatever happens, you alone are to blame.' Then the thought of his father's anxiety coming to him, his eyes filled with tears as he sighed, "Poor father! how distressed he will be, and how hurt at my disobeying him! Oh! why was I such a fool?" and in an agony of contrition and remorse, he threw himself down upon a heap of dirty straw that filled one corner of his cell.

Meanwhile Mr. Stannard had returned to Nilt, and learned, with consternation and sinking at heart of his son's foolish conduct and its consequences' All the others of the party had escaped scatheless, and Mr. Stannard, in the poignancy of his grief, was at first moved to condemn them strongly for having deserted his boy. But he reflected that Kent had no business to be with them, and that they were in nowise bound to stand by him; and then, after all, they had their own heads to save.

When the first outburst of passion had spent itself Mr. Stannard grew calm and collected. If his son were to be rescued alive the utmost skill and strategy would be necessary, and there was nothing to be gained by wild manifestations of feeling.

When Bunty learned of the serious plight of his young master he became almost frantic with fury at

the insolence of the Kanjutis, and was all for getting up a volunteer party from among his countrymen, and following hot upon the tribesmen's trail. But that, of course, was impracticable in every way, and, realising this, he subsided sufficiently to take counsel with Mr. Stannard as to the possibility of securing Kent's release alive.

For the present there seemed nothing to be done. The Kanjutis could not be driven from their two strong fortresses, Thol and Maiun, in the same manner as they had been from Nilt fort, without very heavy loss. The approaches to the forts were too well guarded by sangas and lines of breastworks, the vigilance of whose numerous occupants was unremitting, to render any other plan of campaign than one based upon the shrewdest strategy and most patient persistence of any avail.

Poor Mr. Stannard therefore had no other alternative than to possess his soul in patience, meanwhile praying fervently for the preservation of his beloved boy from a cruel death.

If the British had only had with them a battery of heavy field-guns the problem of clearing a way through the valley would have been settled in short measure. Tis true they got lots of work out of their two seven-pounders and their one Gatling, in spite of its fondness for jamming. But the tribesmen had so strengthened their sangas with timbers

and stones as to render them practically shell-proof, and it seemed a waste of time and ammunition to pound away at them.

Not less than four thousand brave and sturdy fighting-men were opposed to the small British force, and the commanding officer realised that no undue risks could be taken and no men wasted in doubtful experiments.

All this meant delay, and delay meant the prolonging of Mr. Stannard's agony, so that at times he felt like giving himself up to the Kanjutis, if thereby he might be assured of his son being still alive, and be permitted to share his captivity.

In the meantime the days were full of reconnaissances and skirmishes, rifle duels at long range in the valley, and artillery duels high up among the mountain peaks.

The Kanjutis had a kind of roughly constructed cannon, called *sher bachas*, that threw shot and shell in some cases heavier than the seven-pounders, but fortunately their marksmen were very wild, and the missiles did little harm.

A constant source of trouble was the presence of spies in the British camp, who somehow contrived to get word to the enemy of what was projected, and in this way more than one attempt to storm the nearer sangas was foiled.

In spite of all these drawbacks and difficulties,

the British troops kept up their spirits, and when they could not be fighting amused themselves with sport. A thoughtful officer had brought up some footballs from Gilgit, and lively games were played in the afternoons, in which officers and men joined heartily, without regard to difference of rank. The little Goorkhas threw themselves into the game with great energy and noisy laughter, getting lots of amusement out of it in spite of the roughness of the ground.

Very soon, however, the enemy began to object to their invaders thus enjoying themselves right before their eyes, and made their objections known by means of the numerous sher bachas they had placed on the mountain-side. Football under artillery fire was certainly a novel experience for all the players, yet the native guns made such very bad practice that neither players nor spectators paid any heed to them, and nobody was a whit the worse.

Some of the officers who had brought their golfclubs along even tried to introduce the good old game into these mountainous wilds, but they soon found that there were too many "hazards," for both ball and player, to be able to do much at the game.

It need hardly be said that Mr. Stannard had no heart for any of these amusements. The football, indeed, added a further pang to his sorrow by

making him think how heartily Kent would have gone in for it had he been at hand.

"He'd have shown them how to do better than that," he murmured, with a sad smile at the awk-wardness of the impulsive Goorkhas, who would kick without bending the knee, and consequently made ludicrous misses. "Poor dear boy! God alone knows if he'll ever play football again."

While Mr. Stannard was thus pondering and praying, the faithful, loving little Goorkha was devoting all his powers of mind and body to the problem of finding the way to his young master.

From a captured Kunjati he learned that Kent still lived, and was kept a close prisoner in Thol fort, although how long his life would be spared there was no telling. This fort then became the goal of his desires, and certain it was that nothing short of his own death would prevent him from reaching it.

He was a skilled cragsman. Nothing in the way of dizzy heights or narrow ledge or slippery slope could daunt him. Where the chamois itself would have had to turn back, Bunty, holding on more like a fly than a human being, would find a footing somehow.

So numerous were the enemy's sangas, and so excellent the use to which they put the many varieties of rifles with which they were armed, that

any attempt to explore the cliffs during the day was out of the question. At night only could the work be done, and then, what with fire-balls and rock-avalanches that came rolling down the seemingly impregnable cliffs at the first warning of danger, to say nothing of the perils of a false step in the darkness, the risk was quite sufficient to deter any but the bravest men. Yet night after night Bunty went forth from Nilt fort, and spent long weary hours groping in the obscurity for some path that would lead the British troops up to the heights above Thol, whence they could descend in force upon the fortress, and carry it by storm as they had done Nilt.

Mr. Stannard would gladly have joined him had he been equal to the task. But he recognised his own unfitness, and was fain to content himself with warm words of encouragement, and repeated promises of a rich reward should the Goorkha's gallant endeavours be crowned with success.

"Nothing that you can ask of me that it is in my power to give will I refuse you if you only succeed," he would say; while Bunty would shake his head, and, with a strange look of love and resolution in his dark eyes, reply, "I want nothing but the young Sahib."

One night Bunty's heart beat high with hope. He had hit upon a way up the high cliffs where they faced the blockhouse built by the British on the ridge. With a dozen of his countrymen he noiselessly descended into the Nilt nullah and began the difficult ascent of the opposite cliffs. For a time all went well, but they had not accomplished one-third of the distance when the watchful or well-informed Kanjutis revealed their knowledge of the daring design.

First a gun was fired as a signal from the enemy's lower sanga. Then a loud shout was carried up the mountain-side from sanga to sanga, in response to which, amid rattle and roar of tomtoms, fire-balls and rock-avalanches plunged down the precipices, and the quick cracking of a hundred rifles and jezails filled the air.

Poor Bunty and his plucky companions were compelled to shrink into hollows of the cliffs, and then creep back to the fort, chagrined at the failure of their essay.

Next morning it was observed that two new sangas had arisen in the night just over the portion of the cliff which Bunty had planned to scale.

Baffled but not beaten, Bunty persevered in his daring explorations under the cover of darkness, and a few nights later announced to Mr. Stannard that he had now found a better path than before, and that the enemy could be driven from their strongholds if the right means were taken.

Mr. Stannard at once brought him to the commanding officer, and a council of war was held, with the result that Bunty's plan was approved, and the decision made to give it a trial without delay. The great thing was to keep the plan of attack secret, and so admirably was this done that not one of the numerous spies in the British camp got any suspicion of what was in the wind.

A force of one hundred men, fifty Goorkhas and fifty Dogras, all hill-men, and equal to anything in the way of cliff-climbing, was detailed, under command of Lieutenant Manners-Smith and the guidance of Bunty, to slip away quietly at dinner-time and take up a position in the *nullah* at the foot of the cliffs, to hide there until daybreak.

With the dawn of day a covering party, composed of the best rifle-shots in camp, took up a position on the ridge facing the four sangas that were to be stormed by the hundred men still hiding in the nullah. Supporting this covering party were the two seven-pounders, and as soon as it became light enough to see clearly, a storm of bullets, solid shot, and shrapnel was directed upon the doomed sangas. The moment this firing opened the storming party began their ascent, Bunty showing the way.

They had to scale a cliff more than twelve hundred feet in height, while exposed every foot of the way to the fire from the lower sangas, and to the even more dangerous avalanches of rocks from the upper sangas. It was in every way a most daring venture, yet Lieutenant Manners-Smith and his men went at it as gaily as though it were some competition for a prize.

As for Bunty, he had but one thought in his mind—to reach and to deliver his imperilled young master.

It was certainly an extraordinary scene for a battle. To adopt the language of one who was a spectator of it all: "From their lofty ridge the covering party looked down upon the Kanjut Valley, with its rushing river, its terraced fields, and its numerous fortified villages, while high above the nearer mountains the snowy summits of the Hindoo Koosh rose into a cloudless sky. The parapets and roofs of the towered fortresses below -Maiun, Thol, and the Ziarat-were crowded with spectators, anxiously watching the decisive action that was being fought out on the mountain sky-line high above them, while from every sanga and rude sher bacha battery all along the enemy's line of defences the tribesmen looked on in perplexed crowds, wondering what would be the result.

From their lofty position the covering party could see the little storming party gradually crawl-

ing up the cliff-sides, looking more like ants picking their way up a rugged wall than human beings.

For some time the garrison of the upper sangas had no suspicion of the danger menacing them from below, and it was not until the warning came across from Maiun that they woke up to the situation. Then, in spite of the fierce fire from the covering party, they hurled showers of stones down the cliff, boldly venturing out into the open to roll over the ready-piled rocks, and thereby rendering the position of the climbers perilous in the extreme.

Yet, by great good fortune, none of these were swept away, although some were badly bruised, and they kept on dauntlessly, until at last Bunty and Lieutenant Manners-Smith side by side, closely followed by the men, reached the foot of the nearest sanga, and running round behind, were able for the first time to bring their rifles into play.

One after another the sangas were stormed and their defenders put to flight, the charge of the British soldiers being so impetuous that the natives fled before it like chaff before the wind, making such poor use of their weapons that four men wounded represented the total of casualties among the storming party.

Amid the echoing cheers from the British camp the brave little band under Lieutenant Manners-Smith rushed down the mountain-side towards Thol, Bunty twenty yards ahead of all, for he was determined to get inside the fort ere its garrison could have a chance to carry off Kent.

At the same time a wonderful thing was happening that Mr. Stannard never clearly understood.

Ever since Kent's disappearance Hercules had been acting so oddly that it was necessary to keep him shut up. Now in some way he obtained his liberty, and at once employed it to make straight for Thol, as if divining by some instinct that there his master was to be found. With great eager leaps he bounded down the hillside, across the nullah, and up the steep slope, catching Bunty just as he reached the gate of the fortress.

Mr. Stannard's heart thrilled with hope as Goorkha and mastiff vanished together.

"God in heaven grant that they may be in time!" he prayed through parched lips.

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

While all this was taking place, poor Kent, immured in his dark, dismal dungeon, to which the reports of the rifles and the cries of the Kanjutis indistinctly penetrated, was in a perfect agony of suspense. He realised that a decisive struggle was in progress, and he felt as if he would have consented to sacrifice almost anything if he could only be a witness of the conflict and see how the tide of battle turned.

Not only was he concerned about the issue of the engagement, but there came to his mind the question, "What will the Kanjutis do with me? Will they carry me away with them, if they are driven out of this fort, or "—and the notion sent a chill shudder through him—"will they kill me in revenge for their defeat?"

There was no one to help him solve this awful problem. If his place of confinement were guarded, the sentinel made no sound.

Kent listened at the crack of the door for some

minutes with wildly throbbing heart but not a movement could he detect outside the rude though strong door that shut him in. Oh, how hard it was to be thus confined, when one's own fate was in the balance! For Kent reasoned that either victory or defeat for the natives might mean death to him.

If they suffered defeat, they might kill him by way of avenging the death of their own kinsmen If they achieved victory, although this he thought hardly possible, they might sacrifice him in savage exultation over their enemies. All this filled the poor boy's mind with torturing apprehensions, as he vainly strove to make out from the muffled sounds that found their way to him how the struggle was tending.

In the meantime Bunty, with the dashing recklessness of a Viking in a Berserk fury, charged into the fort, swinging his *kukris* high in the air, and uttering appalling cries. Not one of the garrison dared to face him, and several that he overtook he cut down with one resistless sweep of his terrible weapon.

Just as he entered the gate Hercules joined him, quite as fear-inspiring a creature in his own way as the Goorkha was in his, and side by side the two rushed hither and thither, seeking the young master they both so dearly loved.

From the moment the storming party, small as it was, reached the walls of Thol fort panic reigned supreme amongst its occupants. Scarce any attempt was made at defence, and, hardly striking a blow, the Kanjutis fled out through the back gate and down into the valley, where they were joined by the people from Maiun, and, the two streams of terror-stricken fugitives mingling into one mad mob, jostled and fought their way up the rough narrow road leading farther into the mountains.

The great majority of the Goorkhas went on after them, but Bunty stayed to search for Kent. Whether he would have ever found him unaided by Hercules cannot be said. Certain it is that, after following at his heels for a while, the mastiff, as if doubting the man's ability to accomplish the object of their search, went off on his own account.

A few minutes later Kent, wondering what the sudden silence meant, for the noise of battle had swept on up the valley, leaving Thol far behind, heard a loud sniffing at the door of his prison that for the moment filled him with alarm. Yet he could not forbear striking the door with his feet and calling out, "Who is that? What do you want?" for anything was better than such harrowing uncertainty.

What words can then describe the thrill of delight with which he heard the sniffing change into a

wild outburst of joyous barking that he at once recognised?

"Herc! Herc! Oh, you darling fellow!" he shouted in tones almost hysterical, for the revulsion of feeling unmanned him for the moment. Then he flung himself at the door, and strained his strength to the utmost in a furious endeavour to force it open.

But the sturdy barrier defied all his efforts, and he gave up the attempt, while he tried to devise some other way of escape; the mastiff outside all the time barking his loudest, as though to give him encouragement.

Had this been all that the presence of Hercules effected, it would have been no slight service in itself, for Kent sorely needed cheering up. But the dog's tremendous uproar did something better. It reached the quick ears of the alert Bunty, who was darting hither and thither on his quest of love, and presently he too stood before the door of Kent's prison-house.

"Is the young Sahib in there?" he cried in a voice tremulous with eagerness.

"Yes, yes, I'm in here, Bunty!" Kent replied.

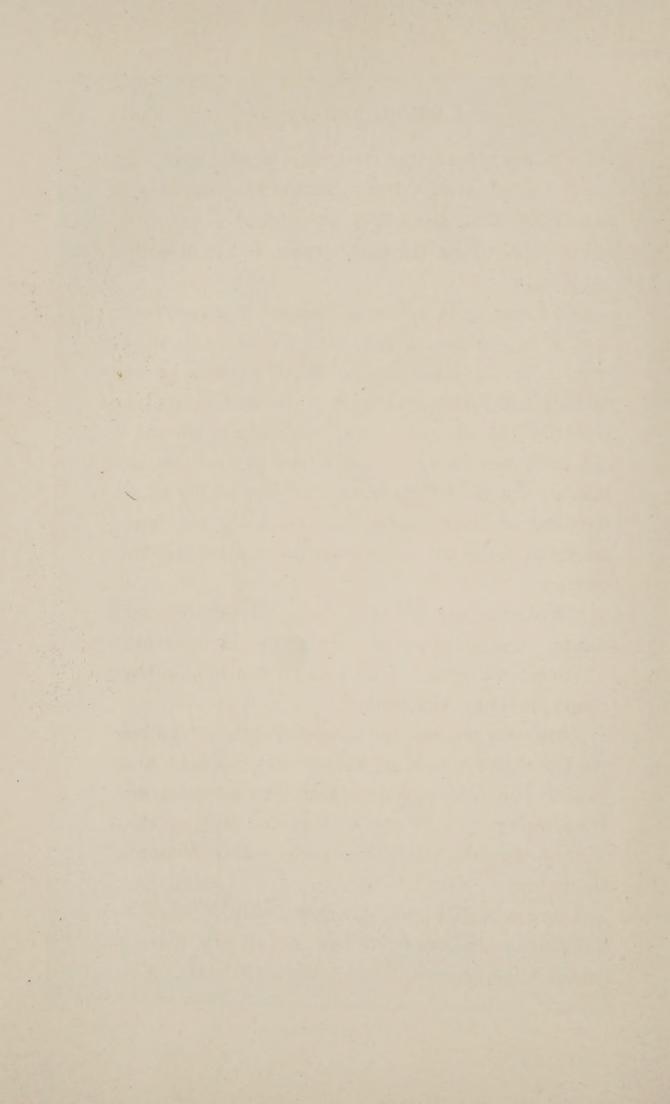
"Break down the door, and let me out."

"Me get you out quick, quick," and he ran off for a piece of timber that he had noticed near at hand. Returning with this, he called out to Kent to



Bunty to the Rescue.

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stand away from the door, and then, using the timber as a battering-ram, attacked the barrier with such force that, stout as it was, it had to give way before him, and at the third charge it fell in with a loud crash.

Kent was ready to spring forward on the moment, and in the excess of his gratitude and delight, he first flung his arms around Bunty's fat neck and hugged him like a long-lost brother, and then repeated the operation with Hercules. It would not have been easy to say which of the two, the man or the mastiff, manifested the most joy at the recovery of their master, and certainly the boundaries of India did not contain a happier trio that morning.

"Where is my father? Is he all right?" were Kent's eager questions as soon as he got his breath.

"Sahib all right. Him looking for you," replied Bunty, nodding vigorously.

There was no need for further speech. Grabbing the Goorkha's arm Kent rushed off, impatient to be outside the hateful walls which had confined him. There was no one to oppose him, and he soon stood on the maidan, with the whole valley outspread before him.

There was still much of interest in the scene, for the British soldiers were now in full cry after the fleeing hill-men, but it was towards Nilt that Kent turned his eyes, and a cry of joy broke from him when he descried a familiar form descending rather recklessly into the *nullah*, evidently making for Thol fort.

"Father! O father!" he cried exultantly, and away he dashed across the maidan and down the hillside, Hercules bounding and barking beside him, and Bunty bringing up the rear.

Father and son met at the bottom of the nullah, and Kent was folded to his father's heart in a passionate embrace, that meant not only joy beyond expression at his escape, but forgiveness in full for the disobedience which had put him in such peril.

While they were rejoicing together, the pursuit of the panic-stricken Kanjutis went on, and it was not until after midday that the weary but triumphant troops returned to be refreshed with dinner and to receive further orders.

Although the valley was effectually cleared, the strongholds that protected it emptied of their defenders, and the sangas destroyed, the commanding officer of the expedition considered that the work would not be complete until he had followed the enemy right up to their capitals, and there clenched the advantages already gained. Accordingly, as soon as the troops were fed and rested, the line of march was taken up, and, burdened by as little baggage as possible, the victorious force pushed

on up the valley into the heart of the Kanjuti territory.

They were prepared to fight their way if necessary, but their commander was counting upon little or no resistance being offered, as the day's defeat would have so demoralised the natives.

In this expectation he was not disappointed. As the little army advanced it passed through a desolate and deserted region, although on every hand were evidences of a dense population.

Now, however, the villages were emptied of their inhabitants, and the forts of their garrisons, and in many cases given up to the flames. They had been fired by the Kanjutis themselves, not by the British, and it would take a generation to repair the damage thus needlessly done.

"What a pity it seems, all this destruction!" said Kent to his father as they walked along together with the vanguard of the invaders. "Why did they do it? To keep us from taking possession?"

"For some such reason, my boy," replied Mr. Stannard. "They evidently have as poor an idea of us as they have of their native foes. They'll think better of us after they've got to know us better."

But for the depressing influence of so much wanton destruction and piteous desolation, the scenes through which the British passed would have been extremely interesting. The villages were well built of stone, with flat-roofed houses and lofty walls, having towers at intervals, and deep moats that made them seem like mediæval European cities on a small scale; while many of the forts were perched high up on fearful crags in the most romantic positions possible.

The deep valley through which they were marching formed the division line between the Hunzas and the Nagaris, the two tribes which had united to oppose the British advance, and the army was on the Nagar side of the Kanjut river, that filled the bottom of the valley.

They had not gone far into the Nagar territory when the natives began to evince returning confidence. They drove their cattle down from the mountains, in whose recesses they had hidden them, and came to meet the strangers with smiling faces and presents of food.

Kent always had a clear recollection of this stage of the march, because for the first time for many days it was possible to get fine beef and excellent mutton in abundance. He had been on pretty poor fare as to quality while at Nilt fort, and had been allowed only sufficient to keep him alive while a prisoner at Thol. It was no wonder, therefore, that he hailed the juicy roasts and crisp brown

chops with great enthusiasm, and felt grateful to the Nagaris for supplying the British force so liberally.

Hercules fairly revelled in bones, and had so many good meals a day that he threatened to get too fat for his own good.

In this comfortable fashion, and without a shot from the enemy, the capital city of Nagar was reached, where the invaders were permitted to halt for a while before proceeding on to Hunza.

In the castle of Nagar, which was quite an imposing structure, and capable of holding out against a strong force if properly defended, Kent saw the Thum, the ruler of the little mountain state, a feeble-looking old man, who seemed completely bewildered by the calamities of war, and evidently longed for peace at any price.

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown—eh, Kent?" said Mr. Stannard as they left the poor old fellow's presence. "If he'd only been allowed to have his own way there'd have been no trouble at all. But his bloodthirsty, blustering neighbour, the Thum of Hunza, bullied him into fighting us, and now he's sorry enough to cry over his folly."

It was this same Thum of Hunza that the commanding officer had upon his mind, and was particularly anxious to meet. But the Thum was no less anxious to avoid a meeting. In fact, from all that could be learned it seemed clear that he had made good use of his head-start to put the utmost possible distance between himself and his pursuers.

Notwithstanding this, the British pushed on as fast as the extremely rough character of the valley road permitted, until at last they came to Hunza city, only to find that the chief object of their quest had departed many hours previously, taking with him all the treasure he could carry beyond the Hindoo Koosh, and leaving his people to settle matters with the British force as best they might.

The situation of the Hunza capital was superb beyond description, the magnificent mountains towering up behind it, and the terraced slopes of the foot-hills spreading out before it, descending step by step until they ended at the river's edge.

Mr. Stannard and Kent were among those who secured quarters in the castle, and the zenana portion being the most comfortable, they chose one of those rooms for their occupation.

The poor ladies of the harem had evidently been hurried away with scant ceremony, and there were many pathetic proofs of their panic-stricken flight. Scattered about in wild confusion were work-boxes filled with Manchester cotton and Birmingham

needles, artificial flowers, and unfinished sewing; while boxes of tooth-powder, pots of rouge, parasols, bits of silk, and other feminine fopperies showed that even in these far-away mountain wilds the heart of woman was the same as in the centres of civilisation.

Kent's feelings were moved by these touching tokens of terror. "The poor things," he said; "it seems a shame to have scared them away. I'm sure we wouldn't have done them harm if they had stayed. And," he added, with a gleam of humour in his eye, "I'd like very much to have seen some of them, too."

But this curiosity of his was not to be satisfied, although he accompanied the expedition all the way to Misgar, a miserable little settlement that was the farthest inhabited spot in the Kanjut Valley.

The Thum of Hunza being out of reach beyond the Hindoo Koosh, on his way to the dreary Pamirs, the commanding officer made Misgar the end of the chase, and after a brief occupation the order to return to Kashmir was given.

As Mr. Stannard and Kent were standing on one of the towers watching the troops getting under way, Mr. Stannard said in a consoling tone—

"Well, Kent, my boy, if we were turned back from Thibet, and had our plans balked in that direction, we at least have the satisfaction of being to-day at the very end of the road to Central Asia, so far as it has been opened up by British influence. Of course England is not going to stop here. It won't be long before she's got her foot in Chitral. But we won't stay for that. We'll get back to India now as fast as we can. We've both had enough of this sort of life for the present."

"But, father," cried Kent, his face flushing with eagerness, "you haven't given up the notion of getting to L'hasa, have you? You'll surely try again?"

Mr. Stannard was silent for a moment before replying. "Perhaps I will," he said in a thoughtful tone. "I cannot say now, although I confess I hate the idea of being beaten by a lot of ignorant mountaineers."

The return to Simla was effected without mishap, and without any especially exciting incident. Here they remained until the rains were over, and then went down to Calcutta for the winter.

The Sikh and Goorkha accompanied them, but Hercules had to be left behind, for the climate of Lower India would soon prove fatal to him. Happily good quarters were obtained for him, Kent refusing flatly to give him up altogether.

"No indeed," he said. "I'll not part with dear old Herc. We'll be sure to want him when we

try again to get to L'hasa," and he gave his father an arch look that showed how firmly the idea was fixed in his mind of making another attempt to visit the mysterious capital of the heart of Asia.

THE END

